

The Doctor Is In

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The Doctor Is In

by [Spoon888](#)

Summary

Taken prisoner by Decepticons, Ratchet is prepared for the worst; Interrogation, torture, deactivation. What he didn't expect was getting roped into becoming the enemy faction's temporary physician.

Prologue

Ratchet held his helm up high, unafraid and unbroken. The fist locked around the dura-steel cuffs keeping his hands behind his back urged him forwards. The longer strides of the taller Con made him stumble. He cursed and rightened himself quickly, jogging to keep up and refusing to give any reaction to their sad little games.

The Decepticon's sunken base was humid and derelict, and smelt vaguely of damp and fish. Fluorescent safety lighting flickered and buzzed overhead, the bulkhead's were warped and creaking, and water dripped from the ceiling and left puddles of salt water on the decking. Ratchet grimaced as he was walked through pools of it deep enough to rise above his treads. It was a shame all these Cons hadn't already succumbed to rust wallowing down here. Ratchet hadn't seen conditions so poor since he'd been sent as a relief worker to one of the off-planet mining colonies.

Upon entry, he wasn't dragged off into the groaning depths of the base where the brig was, so he steeled himself for what he assumed was going to be an interrogation. He'd need his strength for that, so he didn't struggle when his captor stopped before a wide, menacing steel door and sent the wireless command to unlock it.

He was shoved over the threshold into what looked like a haphazard, out-dated repair bay, full of all the tools any imaginative enough tormentor would find more than adequate for extracting information.

No amount of mental preparation could brace him for Megatron *himself* waiting by the metal slab in the centre of the room though, concealed half in shadow, *lurking*.

He'd have to do better than *that* to intimidate Ratchet.

"Oh, it's *you*," he sniffed, unimpressed. "Nothing better to do today?"

Unaffected, Megatron's optics passed over him and focused on his captor instead. "Release him and leave us."

Ratchet frowned, wincing when rough hands unlocked the cuffs. His hands now free, the Decepticon gave him a firm push further into the room. Ratchet stumbled with an irritated grumble, twisting to glare. The Stunticon sneered and slipped back out the door. The panel flashed red as it locked.

Ratchet twisted to face Megatron, taking note of the tools that had been left lying around the repair-bay in his peripheral vision. A hydro-spanner lay to his right, within leaping distance. He'd need to swing it hard to do any real damage to the slag maker, but he could always *shove* it somewhere unpleasant. There were some delicate places on a mech *no* amount of battle armour could protect...

The real question though was; could he reach it and disable Megatron before the great bucket-head fired up his fusion-cannon and blasted him to shreds? Unlikely.

"I wouldn't, if I were you, medic," Megatron rasped quietly, knowing *exactly* what was on his mind. "Not if you want your friend to go free."

Ratchet's resolve plummeted, leaving a cold, hollow feeling in his chest.

"Who?" He demanded.

Megatron pressed a button on the comm on his wrist and the door opened behind Ratchet again. One of the thuggish Combaticons came thundering and clattering in with a struggling red mecha, cursing and thrashing. Sideswipe.

But of course. Who else would it have been.

"A misguided rescue attempt, I'm assuming," Megatron rasped coldly. "You must mean less to Prime than I had assumed."

A large steel grey hand closed around Sideswipe's head and slammed it with a crunch of metal against the open doorway, and that soon put a stop to the struggling. Sideswipe wobbled, his knees weakening, but the cruel grip of the Decepticon holding him kept him upright.

Ratchet swallowed, his jaw clenched tightly at the dent the blow had left in the side of the stupid, reckless, *brave* moron's helm.

"Cooperate with our wishes, and your friend goes free," Megatron stated, his words lagging and quiet. Something wasn't quite right with him. Ratchet's optics wandered over the warlord's powerful, shadowed frame, studying-

"Well jokes on you, Mega-slag," Sideswipe snapped his dizzy head up to spit. "We're not 'friends'. He doesn't even like me-"

Megatron nodded and the Combaticon hit Sideswipe against the doorway again. This time Sideswipe's legs went out from under him and he fell to his knees. The Combaticon -Vortex- drew a leg back as though to kick him.

"No-!" Ratchet took a step towards them, but the whirl of Vortex's gun firing up halted him. He tapped it against the side of Sideswipe's head threateningly.

Ratchet forced himself to turn away and meet Megatron's gaze again. "What do you want?"

"Your expertise," Megatron finally shifted out of the shadows, turning so the left side of his gargantuan frame caught the light.

Ratchet felt a surge of spite filled satisfaction at the sight of an ugly blackened hole under the warlord's left arm. It looked deep, like he'd been skewered with something blunt and dirty. Primus knew how deep it went into his chassis. Shame it hadn't gone through his spark chamber- a couple inches higher and Ratchet could have been making toasts on the Ark right about now.

But Megatron always had been infuriatingly difficult to kill.

"Repair the damage and the front-liner goes free."

"Or I refuse, and you rot from the inside out like you deserve." Ratchet quirked a brow. "Why don't you use your *own* fragging medics?"

Megatron's optics smouldered fiercely, "you refuse, and he dies. Here and now."

The Combaticon twisted the gun against the side of Sideswipe's head. Sideswipe blinked dazedly, struggling to follow the conversation.

"Furthermore, sabotage my repairs? And you *both* die." Megatron finished. He sat down heavily on the medical slab, his movements slow and laboured. He didn't say anymore, but he didn't really need to.

Ratchet whispered a curse. He really didn't have much of a choice but to concede.

But that didn't mean he had to make this anything less than *extremely unpleasant* for Megatron too.

Harpooning

Rather conveniently, Ratchet didn't have to go to any great lengths to make Megatron's repairs unpleasant. The unhinged maniac was making those arrangements *himself*.

Paranoid, he wouldn't let Ratchet anywhere near his (most likely empty) bucket of a head so he could put him into stasis for the procedure -even with Vortex watching over him with a blaster- but there were no sensor blockers to be found- not that Ratchet was even allowed into the messy drawers and cupboards to look for some.

"This will hurt," Ratchet reminded him coldly, watching apprehensively as Megatron laid back, turned onto his side, and stretched his arm out behind his head to display the gaping wound. Fresh energon welled up and trickled down his torso.

Ratchet's first instinct was to stem the flow, but outstretched fingers twitched an inch away from the warrior's frame, hesitating. As tough as Megatron liked to think he was, pain was pain, and violent mechs tended to lash out when fingers were jabbed into open wounds...

There was a bang and gasp as Vortex smacked his blaster around the back of Sideswipe's head.

"Alright, alright!" Ratchet barked, and seeing as there was a distinct lack of absorbent medical materials to hand and his subspace had been emptied upon capture, he had to improvise, snatching a dull, unkept, purple banner off the bulkhead. He began tearing it into strips.

Megatron's lip curled with a growl, and it was only when Ratchet wadded it up to soak up some of the energon and wipe away the black gunk to see what he was doing, that he realised the banner he had destroyed depicted the Decepticon insignia.

"Get over it," he muttered, sticking his fingers into the wound to find the leak. Megatron's engines turned over in surprise.

Acute temperature gauges in his finger tips led him to the warmest energon, where the severed main fuel line was leaking copious amounts of it. He pinched the line and snatched a dusty clamp off a nearby equipment table. He blew off the layer of dust and clamped the lines properly.

Megatron began to bring his arm down.

"No," Ratchet slapped his bicep. "Stop moving."

Megatron (thankfully) had gotten a little woozy from the energon loss, and didn't surge up to bite his head off for his audacity.

His optics were a watt dimmer than was expected and his expression lacked it's usual age-inducing scowl. Ratchet decided to take advantage of his more sedate behaviour and dug a little deeper into his chassis, plucking out pierces of shrapnel as he went. The metal was black, and didn't look like anything from Cybertron or Earth. And certainly wasn't from any weapon his comrades possessed.

"How did this happen?" He hazarded an attempt at small talk. He had cleared most of the muck out, but some of it might still be rushing through Megatron's fuel lines. If it was poisonous? He might deactivate anyway. Whoop-dee-do.

Megatron grunted, but Vortex, morbidly entranced with the repairs -which was fine by Ratchet so long as he wasn't abusing Sidewipe- answered for him. "Screamer harpooned him."

Ratchet's sharp laugh surprised even himself, his fingers stumbling on a fuel line and spraying energon everywhere. "Slag," he cursed, rectifying the situation. "What did Starscream use to make this harpoon?"

Vortex shrugged.

Sighing, Ratchet gave Megatron an impatient nudge. All he earned from the infamously silver-tongued gladiator was an incoherent grunt.

"You've been a great help," Ratchet muttered sarcastically, watching Megatron's optics fade further with each passing second. "Find me a poison testing kit," he threw at Vortex.

The stupid helicopter blinked at him cluelessly.

"Then find me someone who knows *where* to find a poison kit!" Ratchet thundered, and if his hands weren't still buried inside Megatron's chassis he would have shaken them threateningly. "Unless you *want* Starscream in charge?! Let's hope he doesn't have anymore harpoons, huh!"

That did the trick. Vortex was on the comm before Ratchet had finished speaking, shielding his mouth so Ratchet wouldn't be able to hear or read his lips. Ratchet didn't care who he was calling or what he was saying, concentrating instead on the pulse of Megatron's spark and the dipping pressure of what little energon he still had moving through his lines. It looked like he had been low on it to begin with, and the fluid puddled on the floor at his pedes was a faded, discoloured blue, like it was old, or had hardly any charge to it-

He was saved from the pity he was beginning to feel for the evil, run down, piece of scrap when the doors opened again and Soundwave swept inside. Megatron's stoic communications officer passed Vortex and Sideswipe knelt at his pedes without so much as a glance their way, and said nothing to Ratchet when he came to stand on the other side of the repair slab. He began filling a nearby syringe with a clear, gel-like fluid.

"Care to share?" Ratchet growled.

"Binding solution," Soundwave announced, plucking a fuel cable from Megatron's neck and pinching it to inject the solution in. "Starscream; has been experimenting in polonium's effects on internal fluids."

Polonium. No wonder Megatron's fuel looked so discoloured. "I need energon. If you want him to live, that is."

Soundwave's visor glowed dangerously. He was much better at the intimidating thing than Megatron. Much better. But Ratchet wasn't going to let him know that.

"Supplies; in transit," Soundwave droned. "Starscream; also requires medical attention."

Ratchet imagined so. Megatron probably hadn't appreciated being harpooned.

The solution Soundwave had injected him with would bind any of the remaining polonium in Megatron's fuel system together, making it easier to filter out, and once fresh energon was here - pillaged straight from a human power station no doubt- Megatron would be as right as rain before morning.

Tragic.

Soundwave seemed satisfied enough with his work. He turned to Vortex. "Remove the additional

Autobot."

"Now wait just a minute!" Ratchet barked. "He's not going anywhere until I've seen to him-"

"Audacious request; *denied*," Soundwave's deep voice was a near growl.

"How the Pit is he supposed to get home?" Ratchet gestured angrily. "The deal was I fix your lunatic and you let the dumb kid go!"

Soundwave tilted his helm calmly. "Affirmative. Your 'Dumb Kid' will be released from custody. As per your arrangement."

"*Released from custody*," Ratchet sneered, "Don't think I don't know what that means. You're going to shoot him out the airlock. Look at him! He can't swim back to shore. He can't even walk straight!"

"Not our fault" Vortex protested behind Soundwave's towering frame.

"You smashed his head against a blast-proof doorway, you overgrown ceiling fan, who else's fault is it gonna be?!" Ratchet raged, throwing the empty syringe. It clacked harmlessly against Soundwave's left shoulder.

Soundwave wasn't emoting a great deal of sympathy, but he did turn to consider Sideswipe struggling to stand upright. There was a long pause. For a moment, Ratchet thought the notoriously emotionless Decepticon was going to shrug and leave Sideswipe to Vortex's cruel devices, but he surprised him. "We will not waste our resources on an Autobot. There is another medic residing among your faction on Earth. They will repair any damage."

Ratchet felt a crippling surge of helplessness. Yes, First Aid was good, but *he* was the reason Sideswipe was here. It was his responsibility to help him-

"Your 'friend' will be safely deposited at the perimeter of your base," Soundwave intoned firmly. "And you will cooperate."

"I *am* cooperating," Ratchet sneered, clenching his energon slick hands into fists. He felt the petty urge to scoop some of it up from the floor and fling it at Soundwave, but he was still 'cooperating' so he would have to wait until he knew Sideswipe was safe.

Then he would be free to fling whatever he liked.

"Deal," he nodded stiffly.

Soundwave nodded back, and to Ratchet's relief, Sideswipe was picked up and steadied, before being walked to the door.

"Wait- Ratch'?" He heard his disoriented voice call from the hallway. Ratchet wasn't able to respond before the door sealed again, locking him in with Soundwave and a barely conscious Megatron.

Ratchet glared at the sealed doorway until Soundwave shifted into his line of sight and gave him a hard stare. Begrudgingly, he got back to work, and didn't at all feel guilty when his knuckles knocked sensors that made the half-conscious warrior twitch in pain.

"Whoops," he murmured, knocking another.

"For such a praised physician, you are clumsy," Soundwave said dangerously.

"I'm a war prisoner," Ratchet snapped. "Even a medic's hands can shake with stress."

He made a point of knocking his perfectly unshaken hand into another cluster of sensors, and turned his head to hide his devious smirk.

Starscream turned up soon enough, with cracked cockpit glass and a loosened wing. The top edge of the wing was crinkled with dents in the shape of fingers. Ratchet enhanced his vision and spied the telltale black scuffs of paint transfers. They were neither serious nor complicated injuries, nothing a Constructicon wouldn't be able to handle.

"I don't see why *I* should have to settle for untrained hacks when there is now a perfectly good medic enslaved to us," Starscream sniffed at Soundwave, picking up what sounded like an argument they had been having earlier.

Soundwave stood with his arms folded and gave no reaction. Which displeased Starscream greatly.

"You, medic!" He snapped jabbing a digit at Ratchet, thinking him a much easier target. "Attend me!"

Ratchet took his time cleaning Megatron's energon from his fingers, "I know you know my name, Starscream."

Starscream's one working wing twitched angrily. "Just make this quick. I don't want to be here when he gets back up again." He eyed Megatron's slack jawed face warily.

"I don't do rush jobs," Ratchet told him. "And you won't have to worry about him. He won't be going anywhere till morning."

That seemed to amuse Starscream. He glanced Soundwave's way, and they shared a look between them. "Oh, won't he?"

Ratchet knew he was a prisoner here, but even hapless Decepticons had to have a little respect for doctors orders, didn't they? He frowned, casting another glance at Megatron. "If he knows what's good for him."

"He doesn't," Starscream muttered, turning and bracing hands against an equipment table, showing Ratchet his wing. "If he did, he wouldn't have been injured in the first place."

Ratchet laid hands on the seeker and began shifting Starscream's wing back into place, pushing a little rougher than he would normally have. "Yeah, by you, I hear."

Starscream's hiss of pain transmuted into a snicker, "I warned him. Twice."

Ratchet held the wing in place and began to tighten bolts to keep it there. "You have a parts room? Where do you keep spares"

"Why?" Starscream growled suspiciously.

"Your cockpit," Ratchet reminded him, wondering if he needed to take a look at the seeker's head.

He might have taken a blow.

Starscream ran an absent hand down the cracked glass, "Just duct-tape it."

Ratchet's optics nearly bulged out of his head. Duct-tape? That ugly, flimsy human solution to fixing things?

"And what'll that achieve?!" He couldn't help shifting into lecture mode. "Primus, Starscream, I thought you were one of the smart ones. Cracked glass won't survive the pressure of flight-"

"So it'll break eventually and I'll qualify for a new one." Starscream told him impatiently. "Until then it'll keep the draft out."

Ratchet pressed a knee into Starscream's back to brace himself as he tightened the last wing bolt. Starscream grunted, scowling.

"Starscream; dismissed." Soundwave intoned from his guard position at the door. "Hook will see to cosmetic repairs."

Starscream's lithe seeker frame inflated with righteous fury. He seemed to shake from fists to glimmering wing tips. "Now I *know you* didn't just presume to give *me* an order-?!"

"Starscream..." Megatron's slurring voice rose from the slab, not only stopping Starscream's impending rant in it's tracks but sending the half-repaired seeker fleeing from the repair bay with a high pitched squawk of panic before Megatron could so much as online an unfocused optic.

Ratchet wasn't able to appreciate just how fast Starscream could move on foot when he wanted to, because Megatron was trying to sit up. He clapped a hand to a bulky shoulder and urged him down. An optic cracked online to glare, and Ratchet was elbowed off with a growl.

"We're not finished," Ratchet tried.

"We are," Megatron decided, vocaliser lagging worse now. "Soundwave, see the medic to his accommodations."

Soundwave tugged him away from Megatron. Ratchet tried to shrug him off, but to no avail. "Let me guess, the brig? Such grateful hosts-"

"We'll have use for you yet," Megatron contradicted, blinking slowly. "You should be grateful, no prisoner of ours has ever been privileged enough to be gifted a berth. I'll need you on call, well rested-"

"If you think I'm going to keep repairing you sparkless trashcans without leverage, you must have smacked your bucket on a durasteel doorframe too."

Soundwave's hand tightened on his shoulder in warning.

"You will do it because you took a oath, medic, to preserve life-"

"I'd be preserving more life letting the lot of you deactivate."

Megatron snorted with an air of disbelief, gesturing for Soundwave to take him away. Ratchet didn't bother to struggle, wondering how long it would be before he was dragged back up here because Megatron had face-planted the decking after fainting from fuel loss.

The stubborn old slagger was his own worst enemy.

Potato-Gate

Ratchet wasn't called upon again that night, but that didn't necessarily mean Megatron hadn't collapsed several times over in his absence. If they had any sense they would have topped him up with more energon, and Soundwave, at least, seemed competent enough to have ensured that had happened. Which meant Ratchet fulfilled his side of the deal. Megatron was alive and (relatively) well, and Sideswipe was safe at the *Ark*, hopefully already in First Aid's care.

Ratchet wondered what a state his medbay would become in his absence. First Aid wasn't bold enough to chase the likes of Sunstreaker from his medbay, and the co-dependent twin would undoubtedly be meddling in Sideswipe's recovery. Ratchet felt agitated just thinking about it.

He had been placed not in the brig, but some derelict box room that had previously been a supply closet. There were no view-ports and only one flickering light. A plain metal slab had been wedged into the corner and the little space remaining in the room was occupied by shelves stocked with cleaning supplies and maintenance equipment.

He refilled through them, looking for something of use. There were some mildly corrosive chemicals and a few tins of old, dried paint. And *two dozen rolls of duct-tape!?* He threw it across in the room in frustration.

There was nothing he could use as a weapon.

After a restless night, his tanks were tight and aching by the time his chrono was telling him it was finally morning. He sure the idiots in charge of his custody had forgotten he was even there. Were they even going to fuel him?! He wouldn't be able to repair any of these hapless morons if he starved to death.

It was mid morning when the door clanked and rolled open. Breakdown filled the doorway, holding a half cube.

Ratchet reached out to take it.

"Is that it?" He grunted, lifting it to optic level.

"It's a full ration," Breakdown frowned, glaring at Ratchet like he was being ungrateful.

"It's *half* a cube, it's a *half* ration," Ratchet explained slowly, wondering if the poor Con suffered from a slow processor.

"That's all we get."

"Don't play the starving Con's card with me," Ratchet pointed. "You thieves plan your whole lives around raiding power stations and pillaging this stuff. You've enough energon to fuel yourself ten fold."

"Yeah, we *would* have," Breakdown stepped back over the threshold, "If you crummy Autobots weren't always running us off before we could take more than a dozen cubes."

The door swept shut again, leaving Ratchet with his half cube and a chest full of barely repressed guilt. He wasn't going to be made to feel bad by a bunch of criminals about protecting human lives.

He knew the Decepticons would be dragging him out of the hole they'd shoved him in to take advantage of his medical skills eventually, but he had at least assumed he would have a reprieve of a day or two before another injury occurred. They had just been on a raid- the very same debacle that had led to his capture, so it would be a week at least before they all ventured out into the big wide organic world again to torment the humans. He had expected them, naively, to have kept themselves relatively unharmed within the sanctity of their own base.

He was wrong.

It was Breakdown that again opened his door and waved at him to come forward. Ratchet sat stubbornly on the narrow slab he was expected to recharge on, leaning against the bulkhead. "Not a chance."

"But we need you," Breakdown frowned. "You're a medic, ain't you? You took an oath."

"I have free will, dim-spark," Ratchet folded his arms stubbornly. "I'm not gonna go out of my way to do you idiots any favours."

Breakdown appeared confused at his unwillingness to help. He looked aside for a moment, scrunching up his hardened features as he thought about something hard. "Yeah but, what if I told you it would be worth it?"

"What could you possibly offer me, asides freedom, that would convince me to help you?"

"A laugh?" Breakdown shrugged.

Ratchet scowled.

As uncooperative as Ratchet wanted to be, his curiosity won out, aided by the sadistic streak Optimus had always deeply disapproved of that wanted to see just what sort of hilarious mess a Con had gotten themselves into. He wasn't disappointed when he was dragged into the same unloved repair bay as the previous day to stand before Motormaster.

The notoriously grouchy truck was stood awkwardly in front of the examination slab, the line of his shoulders stiff and high, and his weight noticeably shifted onto one pede with his servo gripping the edge of the slab for balance. He said nothing, glaring at Ratchet hatefully.

Ratchet looked to Breakdown for answers.

"Well we had patrol so we were driving around, up there, you know," Breakdown pointed at the ceiling and began what sounded like was going to be an unnecessarily detailed story about the events of the Stunticon's day. "And the weather was real nice, so Motormaster decided we should go to the park, with all the organic spawn, see if we could run any over-"

Ratchet began massaging his temples.

"-and it was kinda hard work. Squishy kids are pretty nimble when they got lots of trees to climb in and hide behind-"

"If you've called me down here to pull a *human-being* out from his undercarriage under the guise

that it would be funny-!" Ratchet interrupted loudly, hearing his fuel pump roar in his own audials.

"No, no," Breakdown waved his hands hurriedly, looking taken aback at his outburst, and a little fearful. "It's just a potato."

Ratchet had drawn the breath to yell again and huffed in surprise when the anger he'd summoned evaporated to make way for confusion. "*What?!*"

"We took a break on the street after, and I guess some of the squishies from the park followed us. They shoved a potato down Motor's exhaust pipe."

Ratchet took in Motormaster's constipated expression, and found it difficult not to smirk. He schooled his features, tossing his head back flippantly. "Yeah, and what do you want me to do about it?"

"Take it *out*!" Motormaster hissed dangerously, his fingers squeezing the edge of the slab and causing the metal to groan.

"You're wasting my time." Ratchet pointedly angrily. "Any idiot with a pair of forceps can pull a blockage out of an exhaust pipe. Go to your own pretend medics-"

"We tried Hook, but he and Scrapper were laughing so hard they just pushed it in further." Breakdown implored. To prove this explanation true, Motormaster's steely, menacing face had turned pink from a mix of embarrassment and rage.

Only on the *Nemesis* could such a minor, inconsequential mishap become a genuine medical emergency.

"You know this serves you right for being an immoral psychopath, don't you?" He pointed at the truck.

Motormaster growled low in his throat, shifting his stance - then wincing in regret.

"Alright, I'll take it out on one condition," Ratchet turned between the two of them. "No more hit and runs in the play park- or anywhere else for that matter."

"I make no promises," Motormaster sneered.

"Then enjoy life with that potato," Ratchet said flippantly, moving to the door.

"Wait!" Breakdown stopped him, looking to Motormaster imploringly, "He doesn't *mean* that."

Ratchet arched a brow and considered the truck expectantly.

Motormaster turned an even brighter shade of pink and looked away. "Fine." He grunted. "We won't run down disgusting fleshling spawn."

"Any organic," Ratchet reaffirmed.

"What if they're really slow and old?" Breakdown asked thoughtfully.

"Especially no!"

"What if they're *jaywalking*?" Breakdown said seriously, and to be fair, it *was* intensely annoying when humans did that.

Ratchet thought about it for a moment. "...You can give them a little bump."

Breakdown made a fist and pumped it in victory. Ratchet rolled his optics and refocused on his terribly uncomfortable patient.

"Get on the slab," he sighed, already exhausted.

Ratchet had wanted to keep the potato as a memento of the time human teenagers had gotten the better of the 'King Of the Road', but the second the starchy vegetable was out, the truck snatched it out of his hand and threw it against the repair bay bulkhead so hard it smashed into an unrecognisable blob of organic mush, sticking to the wall.

Ratchet frowned in displeasure.

"Speak a word of this to anyone," Motormaster began, sizing up to Ratchet and leaning into his personal space, undeserved confidence back in spades. "And it'll be *you* splattered against the wall next time."

"Like I'm going to go around telling people I had my hand up your filthy exhaust," Ratchet snapped.

Motormaster looked ready to punch him for his back talk, but Breakdown's hand on his shoulder seemed to calm him. He, at least, must have realised a medic was only of use to their faction *alive*.

Motormaster stepped back. "Don't expect a thank you," he snarled, and marched for the door.

"I hadn't expected one, you uncivilised trash hauler," Ratchet followed him towards the door, his voice climbing higher. "And where do you think you're going?! Who's going to clean the mashed potato off this fragging wall?!"

Motormaster was already half way down the corridor, and Breakdown was taking Ratchet's shoulder to guide him the other way, back to his storage closet.

"You can clean it later," Breakdown told him kindly.

"Oh *I* can clean it later? How generous of you!"

It was only the evening after potato-gate that Ratchet was called on again. The door to the storage closet swept open and spilled a line of yellow light into the dark room from the corridor outside.

"What vegetable is it this time?" Ratchet muttered at the ceiling.

A shadow blocked some of the light streaming in. A shadow with *wings*. Realising his visitor wasn't Breakdown, Ratchet sat up in surprise to meet the sharp crimson gaze of the seeker in the doorway. His first thought was that it was Starscream coming to finally get his cockpit replaced, but as his optics adjusted to the light he realised the paint was too dark.

"Skywarp?"

Skywarp sidestepped into the room, turning so his wings they would fit through. Another seeker took his place in the doorway. Thundercracker.

Ratchet looked between Starscream's rent-a-thug trine. "Let me guess, you're here to convince me to repair your trine-leader?"

Skywarp's face twisted into a frown. "What? No way, who cares about that loser." He thumbed back at Thundercracker. "He's got a problem."

Thundercracker didn't open his mouth to elaborate on what said problem was, and seeing as he was standing and functional and had all of his limbs attached, Ratchet snorted and laid back on the berth again, his arms folded under his helm. "If it's not an emergency-"

"You took a potato out of Motormaster's butt this afternoon, how was *that* an emergency?" Skywarp argued.

Ratchet should have known that would come back to haunt him. "Fine," he turned to Thundercracker. "What do you have stuck and where?"

Thundercracker flushed flamingo pink.

"What are we, younglings?" Skywarp defended his honour. "We don't stuck stuff into our frames unless we *want* it there-"

"Warp," Thundercracker sounded pained.

"Then what's the problem?" Ratchet was feeling impatient. If this turned out to be a scuff or a nicked bit of paint-

"Thunder doesn't get wet," Skywarp answered.

Thundercracker made a quiet, mournful noise of mortification, his optics fluttering shut.

Ratchet didn't understand what he meant at first.

"He doesn't *what*?!" He demanded.

"He doesn't get *wet*," Skywarp repeated loudly, "His valve is drier than the badlands during the drought."

Thundercracker looked like he had transcended embarrassment, left his physical frame, and was no longer present in the situation. He stared at the bulkhead behind Ratchet blankly.

Ratchet pushed himself to stand with a conceding nod, "Alright, that does sound like a problem."

Unacceptable Alternatives To Lubricant

Throughout Ratchet's many millennia of experience in medicine he had learnt not to overcomplicate his diagnoses'. Usually, the most obvious cause of the problem, was the cause to blame. Thundercracker was having problems self-lubricating, and when a mecha had problems self-lubricating? The problem almost *always* lay with the partner.

Which was Skywarp - who was insisting on tagging along.

Which was going to make trying to speak with Thundercracker about who was really to blame for the problem far from simple.

To begin with, Ratchet had been surprised to learn there were Decepticons that existed who were even *willing* to 'face one another. It wasn't that he was so blinded by hate and war that he had de-personalised his enemies and saw them as nothing but machines of war -he knew they were as Cybertronian as he and his comrades on the *Ark*, with the same desires and needs and mechanical functions (if not quite as much collective processing power) - he was simply surprised that any Decepticon would feel comfortable and secure enough to lower their guard around their psychotic colleagues for that sort of activity. Because even a rough, detached, unaffectionate 'face required the retraction of their three inch thick battle armour. 'Vulnerability' and 'Con' were not concepts that should have coexisted.

He looked between the seekers flanking him on their walk back to the dreaded repair-bay - Thundercracker, with his cheeks glowing and his optics glaring resolutely at the floor, and Skywarp, frowning and casting his trine-mate concerned looks.

Seeker trine's were probably closer to one another than the average Decepticon was to their comrades, and most trine's will have been formed long before the war. As a medic, Ratchet had little involvement in Autobot intelligence, so he didn't know the particularities of the Elite Trine and their relationships with one another, but from just the ten minutes he had spent in their company it seemed to him there were genuine feelings of respect and affection between them.

Affection between Cons. That was something that would keep him up at night for weeks.

Still, as much as they may have *somehow* cared for one another, a situation such as theirs was common - and due to the embarrassing nature of it, it was more common than most would have assumed. Though in most of those cases there was no medical reason for the problem.

Ratchet suspected that either Thundercracker was simply not a valve mech and struggled to experience any pleasure through receiving Skywarp's spike, *or*, Skywarp was a blundering idiot and couldn't find an anterior node with a map and tracking beacon.

And there was a chance it was both.

They entered the repair-bay, and Ratchet was impressed when Thundercracker seemed to overcome his mortification with the whole ordeal to shoulder past them both and take a seat on the examination slab. Without a word he laid back, lifted his pedes to rest them flat on the top, and opened his panel, clearly keen to get it over with as quickly as he conceivably could.

Ratchet, luckily, was rather used to mecha flashing him their private arrays without so much as a "mornin' Ratch," and merely sighed at the unexpectedly sudden sight of Decepticon coochie.

Thundercracker and Skywarp obviously *were* very close though, because the purple seeker

followed his trine-mate and went to stand right next to his reclined frame. He folded his arms across his chest and took in the view with a considering frown.

"Ahem," Ratchet cleared his vocaliser loudly, looking at Skywarp pointedly.

Skywarp looked up. "What?" He asked, oblivious.

"Do you think you need to be here?" Ratchet settled his hands on his hips.

Skywarp looked offended. "Yeah!" He exclaimed. "I'm not leaving you alone with him, not when he's got at his junk hanging out. I mean, you're an Autobot!"

"Thank you for reminding me," Ratchet grit his denta. "You can close your panel for now, Thundercracker. And sit up."

"How are you gonna fix his valve if he's hiding it behind his panel?" Skywarp huffed.

"Warp," Thundercracker finally sat up, his panel now sealed and his face once again glowing with embarrassment. "Please. I just want this over with. You can come back in right after. Stand guard at the door even."

Skywarp pursed his lips together and shot Ratchet the dirtiest look he could possibly muster. He leaned close to his trine-mate, and Ratchet wasn't sure if he intended for him to hear when he whispered loudly. "We can't trust him-"

"*Motormaster* let him pull a root vegetable out of his exhaust pipe," Thundercracker summoned a small smile, soft and very un-Decepticon-like. "It'll be fine."

Skywarp wasn't happy, and he proved so by scowling at Thundercracker and barging past Ratchet with a threat on his way out. "I hear so much as a *peep* and I'm teleporting back into the room with my *fist* through the back of your head."

"Charming," Ratchet muttered, watching him storm through the door. "Real catch you got yourself there."

Thundercracker didn't respond, but his cold stare said he didn't agree with Ratchet's assessment of his chosen partner.

Ratchet decided they'd probably built up as much of a rapport as they were going to manage, so he assumed as professional a demeanour as he could possibly manage under the circumstances and schooled his features into something non-judgmental.

Possibly one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do- *not* judge a Decepticon.

"So, tell me about interfacing."

Thundercracker's optics flared in scandalised horror. "About *what*?!"

"About you and your charming beau out there." Ratchet didn't have time to humour grown-ass Decepticons embarrassed by their own nuts and bolts. "Have you always had his problem, or just with him?"

Thundercracker managed to fight through petrification to shake his head in denial. "No I- no, I haven't always had this problem. And I've always been with him."

Ratchet arched a brow. Thundercracker ducked his head with a frustrated mutter.

Well, that certainly wasn't something Ratchet had expected to hear. Long term lovers, and among the Decepticon ranks at that.

"When did it start?"

"Me and Warp? Back at the academy-"

"No!" Ratchet snapped. "The lubrication problem! I'm not your fragging mother! I don't care where or when you lost your seals your to that moron."

"I noticed something not long after we woke up, here." Thundercracker said sheepishly. "On this planet."

"Probably the stress of a foreign environment," Ratchet muttered to himself, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"I'm not stressed," Thundercracker growled. "And it's nothing to do with Skywarp. I can't- even when it's just me. It doesn't- *you know.*"

He swallowed thickly, his wings dropping low on his back with shame.

Ratchet almost, *almost* felt sorry for him.

"Are you getting enough fuel?"

"No," Thundercracker said mournfully. "But no one is, and so far I'm the only one with this problem."

Ratchet wondered who else Thundercracker had been brave enough to share his issue with. He didn't seem particularly keen to tell *him* about it, and he was a medic. Perhaps another seeker - someone he was as close with as he was to Skywarp. Ratchet immediately thought of the one remaining trine-mate and shuddered at the thought of Starscream having any sort of sex life to compare against Thundercracker's.

He would shake the hand of any mecha willing to take *that* seeker on. If they existed they deserved a medal for bravery. Or more accurately - stupidity.

"Alright," Ratchet conceded. "Let's take a look at you."

Thundercracker's optics darted to the door, and before Ratchet could even offer to invite the grumpy purple seeker back inside, Skywarp reappeared in the room with a stark flash of purple. He glowered at Ratchet when he addressed Thundercracker. "You okay?"

"Fine." Thundercracker laid back, his face hot and his optics bright and dilated.

Ratchet searched through the limited equipment he had to hand. Given that supplies for dealing with battle wounds were in short supply, he really shouldn't have expected to find anything to aid him in doing a pelvic examination. He would have to go back to basics and eye-ball it.

"Looks sore," he said, taking in the flushed, angry look of the mesh around the seeker's opening. Thundercracker shifted at his comment but didn't say anything. Ratchet eyed Skywarp suspiciously. "There are a few micro-cuts here and there too. I don't have anything to soothe them."

Thundercracker nodded acceptingly. "Doesn't hurt. I can handle it."

"How did these come to be?" Ratchet pressed, looking pointedly at Skywarp.

"We told you. He's dry." Skywarp said simply.

"You've still been interfacing?!" Ratchet straightened to stare at him.

"Yeah," they said in unison, like that was obvious, like they had no other choice *but* to.

"Are you two dense?!" Ratchet snarled, bracing his hands on the slab either side of Thundercracker's pedes. "Why?! That can't be enjoyable?! For *either* of you!"

Skywarp scoffed, "We're not stupid, obviously we've been using substitutes."

Ratchet's gaze darkened as a sense of foreboding filled him. "Substitutes," he said slowly. "*What* substitutes."

"Whatever's lying around." Skywarp shrugged, like sticking 'whatever was lying around' up his partner's valve was a perfectly acceptable practice. "Grease, energon, solvent-"

"*Solvent*?!" Ratchet snarled. "No wonder he's *sore*, you blithering idiots. You're lucky his valve hasn't been torn to ribbons!"

Thundercracker sat up angrily, "Hey!"

"Don't 'hey' me, you blue bimbo," Ratchet pointed at him. "You don't stick *any* kind of fluid up a valve but medical grade lubricant!"

Thundercracker opened his mouth to argue, but Skywarp snickered immaturely, "Yeah, but what about transflu-"

"Yes, and *that*," Ratchet snarled. "I've never heard anything so irresponsible and stupid in my entire career. Grease?! *Solvent*?! It's a Primus-given miracle neither of you have an infection. It's a miracle your *only* problem is valvular dryness!"

"Can you not *yell*?" Thundercracker whispered harshly.

"I'll yell all I like!" Ratchet bellowed, and started riffling through the drawers. "There has to be some lubricant around there somewhere-"

"There's not," Skywarp huffed. "We looked. We looked months ago when this first started!"

"Why haven't you brought this to someone's attention? Why are your repair-bays so under stocked?"

"There's just always more important stuff to get, I guess," Skywarp looked sadly at Thundercracker. "And let's face it, we're at war. Me and TC's sex life doesn't rank all that high on Megatron's list of priorities."

"I bet if *he* was trying to frag a dry valve every night they'd be shipping in crates full of lubricant," Thundercracker muttered resentfully.

Skywarp frowned disapprovingly like he didn't agree with his trine-mates opinion of Megatron.

Ratchet pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off his incoming migraine. "Fine. *Fine*. I'll get some for you."

The seekers stared at him in surprise.

"That's nice and all, but how?"

"I'll talk to Megatron."

Skywarp burst into laughter. And even Thundercracker was looking a little amused. "Good one," he murmured.

"If he wants to keep me here to perform repairs on his idiot followers against my will, he better make sure I have a stocked repair-bay." Ratchet said firmly, wishing he had his wrench -or any tool really- to wave about threateningly and prove he was serious.

Thundercracker tilted his helm, "Does that mean you're going to fix us up, willingly?"

Ratchet felt a wave of conflicting emotions, his oath as a medic at war with his duty as an Autobot. Thundercracker's problem wasn't even remotely life threatening, and here he was going out of his way to improve the quality of life for a mecha who routinely shot at his friends and colleges.

On the other servo, if Skywarp and Thundercracker were busy 'facing one another through every available surface they'd be less likely to be out and about on the surface, killing, pillaging, and committing atrocities.

Ratchet straightened up and dismissed any sense of guilt when he nodded. "I'm sure I can make some sort of deal with that bucket-head."

Skywarp and Thundercracker where reluctant to let him speak to Megatron directly, and at first Ratchet assumed it was because they either didn't have the authority to arrange it, or Megatron had succumbed to the energon loss from the previous cycle and was lying offline somewhere in the bowels of the submerged ship. He could always hope.

"You just don't go around asking Megatron for stuff to his face," Skywarp told him seriously, which disproved Ratchet's previous theories about them being unable to arrange a meeting.

There was still a chance he had finally died like the miserable pile of scrap he was though, and they just hadn't found his rusting husk yet. For the sake of his own sanity Ratchet wanted to hold into that hope just a little longer.

"You sound like you're scared of him," Ratchet realised, allowing a hint of teasing to seep into his tone.

Thundercracker looked at him like he'd hit the nail right on the head, but Skywarp was shaking his helm angrily. "No, we just respect him too much to bother him with dumb stuff like this."

"Dumb stuff?" Ratchet repeated, frustrated. "Requesting a restock of vital medical supplies to save your partner's valve is dumb, is it?!"

Thundercracker was blushing again. "It's not like I'll die..." He mumbled.

"Go on like this for much longer and it'll never recover," Ratchet told him seriously, only exaggerating a little bit to get his point through. "The sensors lining the inner mesh are the most

delicate and complicated of your entire frame. Damage them any more and you'll be numb down there."

Thundercracker looked taken aback, "That doesn't-"

"Numb!" Ratchet repeated loudly. "Someone could lodge a fusion cannon up there and you wouldn't feel a thing."

The colour of Thundercracker's cheeks had done an impressive full circle and gone from luminous pink to ashen grey. "Skywarp, we need that lubricant."

"You need more energon is what's the real problem," Ratchet interrupted before Skywarp could start reassuring his trine-mate.

"Yeah, and when we go up to the bridge and ask Megatron for medical supplies *and* energon, he'll strip *us* for parts and fuel and redistribute us out in tiny little pieces amongst the ranks," Skywarp told him angrily.

"But you told me you're not planning to ask Megatron," Ratchet stuck his nose up.

"No, we're asking Screamer."

Ratchet wanted to laugh out loud at how counterproductive that sounded. "And Megatron will take his demands more seriously, will he?"

Skywarp laughed then, flapping a hand at him. Ratchet stepped back to avoid it, frowning. Skywarp wiped an invisible tear from the channel beneath his optic. "Ha! No, Screamer will ask Soundwave. And Soundwave will ask Shockwave, and Shockwave will screw with the paper work and space-bridge the extra over and act like Megatron had already asked for it."

Ratchet felt exhausted from just hearing how many hoops they had to jump through just to get a little artificial lubricant on base. "And Megatron won't notice?"

"Not usually no," Skywarp said, sounding pleased with himself.

Ratchet wondered how often they did things like that, and what less important items they were arranging to have sent to Earth behind Megatron's apathetic back. Probably nothing as sensible as medical supplies. Contraband most likely.

"Why not just ask Shockwave yourself and cut out the middle mechs?" The thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Shockwave is too loyal to go behind Megatron's back for us," Thundercracker grumbled resentfully. "And he doesn't trust Starscream."

"No one trusts Starscream," Skywarp added sagely.

"But he'd do it for Soundwave?" Ratchet stroked his chin.

"Obviously," Skywarp rolled his optics.

Ratchet got the distinct impression he was missing something.

At that point they had arrived back at his supply closet. Skywarp opened the door for him. Ratchet sighed and stepped in. The door wasn't immediately sealed behind him again. He turned to find the seekers looking in after him with little frowns.

"That berth looks like it was pulled straight from a torture chamber," Thundercracker murmured. "We'll bring you a pillow or something."

Ratchet's thanks was caught in his throat. He wasn't sure how he felt about accepting gifts from Decepticons, but to reject it seemed like being difficult just to spite himself. He was already helping these seekers after all. He settled on a grateful nod, looking away.

"Just lay off his valve until the supplies come in," Ratchet told them (Skywarp in particular) over his shoulder. "There are other ways to interface, for Primus's sake."

"Hell yeah there is!" Skywarp grinned like a youngling in an energon goodie factory.

Ratchet caught a glimpse of Thundercracker's flaming cheeks before the door swept shut again, and he found himself falling to his berth with a smile of his own.

They reminded him of ...well-

He involuntarily began thinking of his most notorious patients back at the *Ark*; the young and the stupid and the over-emotional. The ones who, if they weren't damaging their frames with their recklessness in battle, were breaking their sparks with all the unnecessary drama that came with trying to have relationships in the midst of a war.

Ratchet shook those thoughts from his processor. Megatron's Elite fighter jets were nothing like the dumb mechlings he'd left back on the *Ark*. Nothing at all like them...

He rolled onto his side and frowned at the dark shelves full of cleaning supplies.

He shouldn't wish anything but ill will on enemies that had hurt those friends, but he couldn't find it in him to feel any senses of satisfaction from the thought of those stupid seekers struggling to be with one another.

He hoped they made it through to the other side, and he hoped they did it together.

With any luck, he'd still be around to see it when they did.

Violent Overgrown Toddlers

Thundercracker and Skywarp made good on their promise to bring him a pillow, even if it was saggy, discoloured, and slightly damp. A indignant protest rose in his vocaliser before he abruptly stifled it. Recalling the state of the repair bay, and the base as a whole, 'damp and saggy' was probably the best they had to offer.

He kicked it to the end of his berth slab and endured another restless cycle's recharge.

When he was next bothered by a Decepticon it wasn't to be coerced into repairing the next lot of increasing ridiculous self-inflicted injuries, but to be moved.

"Where to now?" Ratchet grumped, wondering how the conditions could possibly get any worse. His shoulder rose up to meet his audials as his arms were yanked forcibly behind his back, his wrists snapped into thick binders. "The brig?"

"**Don't push it medic,**" boomed the Combaticon tank tasked with his relocation, steering him out into the corridor. Loudly. *Very* loudly. Ratchet winced, his audial receptors ringing and whirring in their struggle cope with the deafening decibel. "**You're being upgraded.**"

Ratchet didn't catch what he'd even said. And his patients on the *Ark* had the bolts to call *him* loud.

"What!?"

"I SAID YOU'RE BEING UPGRADED."

Ratchet hadn't thought it possible for him to be any louder. Had he actually been facing the booming tank his audial receptors might have blown out and taken his head off with them.

It took some time for the ringing to subside enough for him to yell back, but try as he did, he just couldn't compete.

"Do you- do you *scream in everyone's audials*?! Or just those lucky enough to be your prisoners!" He yelled over the remains of the ringing. "Are you speaking through a megaphone, or just too dense to adjust your volume output?!"

The Combaticon blinked, taken aback. His surprise was gone a moment later when he cleared his vocaliser and tilted his head back, and set his squared jaw. "**You got something of a mouth on you to, medic.**"

Ratchet twisted in his grip, trying to get a better look at him, his suspicions mounting. "Your vocaliser's malfunctioning, block-head. Let me-"

The Combaticon snarled in rage and hoisted him off the decking by his binders, putting strain on his arms. Ratchet grunted, legs kicking-

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHOSE GONNA BE MALFUNCTIONING-!"

"Brawl!"

Ratchet's pedes hit the floor with a thunk, pain from the impact shooting up his legs. He cursed, stumbled forwards, and without his hands to bring out in front of himself he would have fallen flat on his face had his temperamental captor not steadied him with a hasty tug.

Ratchet looked up in search of his saviour, only find himself staring at an even more temperamental Decepticon.

Megatron.

Wonderful.

And he wasn't dead yet.

Even *more* wonderful.

"That is not a punching bag," Megatron reprimanded fiercely, striding towards them. He was so tall and wide his shoulders filled the space, blocking the view of the corridor behind him. Despite being of almost of equal size and just as psychotic, Ratchet felt Brawl shrink back at his leader's approach, gears whirring as shoulders slumped submissively.

"Sir,"

Megatron took no notice of his soldier's clear lack of functioning 'inside voice', optics flicking over Ratchet's frame in judgment. "If you're desperate for an outlet for your rage, look to your gestalt mates-"

"So he can beat them up instead?" Ratchet couldn't help himself. Seeing as no one else he seemed capable of back talking Megatron he felt compelled to do it in their place any chance he could get. "Such enviable leadership skills I'm seeing from you, Megatron. What better way to deal with your gang of thugs and their anger issues than to encourage the violence!"

Megatron's optics shot up to meet his own, staring dangerously. Ratchet stuck his chin out and met him head on, unafraid.

There was something not quite right about Megatron though. His optics didn't have the same smouldering intensity, his back wasn't as arrogantly ramrod straight as it should have been. And he looked grey. Greyer than usual. Like the tone was off. They were only tiny details, things no one but a medic would notice-

"It is well that I owe you a debt, medic," he began slowly, rasp quiet but dangerous. "Because I would kill anyone else who spoke those words to me."

"What a shame I didn't screw you up when I still had the chance then," Ratchet didn't care to flinch at his empty threats. Megatron's underlings were too stupid to look after themselves, so he was too important to kill. "How are you feeling, your Lordship?" He continued sarcastically, "You're looking a little tired."

"That is hardly your concern."

Ratchet couldn't even be bothered to remind him it *was* his concern because he was a *medic*. He itched for a decent scanner and the authority to order *this* stubborn patient strapped down if just figure out for his own peace of mind what was wrong with him. Perhaps whoever had been tasked with refuelling him hadn't given him enough?

Perhaps *he* had missed some of the poisonous material?

Because there was clearly something festering inside of him. Besides his evil blackened spark, that was.

"You should come see me," he said seriously, taking a step towards him. Brawl held his fast, stopping his advance.

For good reason.

Megatron's lined face twisted in anger. Denta bared, he snarled aggressively. "Hurry up and move him!" He demanded, ignoring Ratchet. "And ensure he arrives unharmed."

"**Yes, sir!**" Brawl tugged Ratchet aside so Megatron could brush past, stubbornly ignoring Ratchet's spluttering indignity. Or perhaps not hearing it in the aftermath of Brawl's barked affirmation.

"Do you wanna rust to death, you old fool!" He yelled after the tense, broad, grey back. "Can't you at least have the decency to let me watch!?"

"**Shut up!**" Brawl bellowed, and so loudly Ratchet couldn't hear his own furious thoughts.

He was dragged off with his mouth full of curses and a chest brimming with persistent fury. Fragging Megatron. He hoped he died slow, living long enough for Ratchet to gloat in vivid, brutal detail about just how *right* he had been.

It appeared Ratchet had pleased at least one mecha during so far brief stint as the Decepticon medic, because his new abode was actually liveable - a room set up like a standard, if somewhat derelict, officer's quarters. The lights worked, there was minimal rust, no duct tape or cleaning supplies to be seen, and the berth, still narrow and old, had a thin layer of padding to cushion him. He sat on it appreciatively, patting the worn down fabric.

Private quarters though they may once have been, it was still his prison cell. There was both a computerised lock on the door and an old fashioned sliding bolt, so even if he did somehow hack the security system- unlikely, he wasn't Jazz after all- he'd still have to break down the blast proof door to get out. And he was no battering ram of a tank.

Not like the mech to have dragged him here.

He was feeling generous, so he lifted a beckoning hand.

"Come here," he called to Brawl before the large angry tank could storm off and leave him to a long boring day of waiting around for the next Decepticon to get something embarrassing stuck somewhere unmentionable.

Brawl was suspicious, but did trudge back over, looming above Ratchet sat on the berth in a typically intimidating fashion. "**What?**"

Ratchet suppressed his wince, lowering the sensitivity on his audial receptors till he was almost deaf. "You go to your medics? About the vocaliser malfunction?"

Brawl looked away angrily -but it was clear that anger was just a cover for embarrassment when the grumpy Con grumbled, "...**They said I didn't sound anything different to them.**"

It would have likely been whispered shamefully, if not for the, well, volume malfunction.

Ratchet was not going to empathise with a violent overgrown toddler all because the other violent overgrown toddlers were picking on him, and yet-

"Let's take a look," he pushed himself to stand.

"**Why?**" Brawl wasn't as appreciative of his offer as Ratchet would have expected. He had to remind himself that Brawl was just a stupid Con whose only experience with medical staff before his arrival were the Constructicons before he started ranting at him.

"Because every time you *breathe* I can't hear myself think," he grouched, closing the distance himself. "And because I'm a medic. It's my job."

"If you make it worse-"

"Firstly, I couldn't possibly make you louder," Ratchet lifted his hands to the base of Brawl's neck, having a job even finding the wires he needed under all the thick tank armour. "Secondly, don't insult me. I've been repairing vocalisers since before you'd been poured into your mould."

He glimpsed a little smirk out of the corner of his optics. Brawl's shoulder twitched with a suppressed snicker. **"Can you do Screamer's next?"**

"Not a chance." Ratchet hid a smirk of his own. "I'm not getting within scratching distance of that seeker unless he's been sedated first."

It didn't take long for him to be called upon to aid another hapless Deception. This time, to his surprise, by one of the Decepticon medical team themselves. Scavenger hurried him along fretfully, stating some sort of problem with Bonecrusher that both Hook and Scrapper were refusing to touch.

"What is it?" Ratchet demanded, bracing for the worst. Whatever the problem he couldn't imagine a mech like Bonecrusher being the model patient.

"It's- there's thousands of them," Scavenger rambled on, pushing at his back. Ratchet kept at a steady pace just to spite him, refusing to rush for a Con. "I don't know what they are, but they're angry. We transformed at the Construction site we were staking out, and they just exploded out of him-!"

"*Out* of him?!" Ratchet exclaimed, quickening his stride now, mostly out of curiosity. He hadn't come across any organic parasites that could effect Cybertronian's yet. With any luck, it could be an opportunity for study.

Scavenger was having to run to catch up to him by time he arrived in the passageway leading up to his repair bay. In the corridor outside stood the rest of the Constructicon gestalt, all looking rather fearful and inching away from the door.

Ratchet looked between them warily.

"Well, Medic," Hook nodded towards the doors, quite obviously peeved with his presence on base - as if Ratched *wanted* to have been kidnapped by Megatron. "Your patient awaits you."

Ratchet braced himself, palmed the door panel, didn't miss how the entire gestalt darted away with

a chorus of squeals and shouts, and stepped through the opening doors to enter into a room *filled* with furious, swarming wasps.

Through the dark haze of furious buzzing insects, Bonecrusher stood at the back of the repair bay, his left arm up and right hand wielding the screwdriver he had jammed into his underarm seam, where he was trying to work free what remained of the nest that had somehow been built under his armour.

"What?!" He snarled when he caught Ratchet staring open-mouthed at him.

Ratchet turned towards the corridor, where the rest of Bonecrusher's useless gestalt were taking shelter behind a support beam.

"Get a fire hose," he ordered.

And part of him, unsurprisingly, was rather looking forward to spraying one thousands pounds per square inch of water pressure at a Decepticon.

"I cannot *believe* I have to say this," Ratchet told all the Constructicons furiously, including Hook, as he threw towels at Bonecrusher's dripping face. "You have to shower every day on this planet. *Every. Day.*"

"We do," Scrapper protested angrily. "We're surrounded by water, it rains all the time, and there are plenty lakes up-"

"No, not in the ocean!" Ratchet shrieked, gasket pressure reaching crisis point. He threw his hands up to clutch at his helm just to keep it from exploding. "Do you want to rust?! It's full of salt!"

They stared at him blankly.

"Sodium!" he roared.

"Really?!" Mixmaster, the *chemist*, blinked cluelessly.

"Solvent!" He barked. "You have to wash in solvent. Not sea water. Not fragging swamp water! Not some muddy puddle you happen upon during a drive! *Solvent*. Or you will *rust*! Or the native wildlife with turn you into an *apartment complex*!"

He pointed at Bonecrusher angrily for that last part. The odd wasp still buzzed around the flooded repair bay.

"And when you shower don't just stand there staring at the wall, contemplating your axels!" He continued. "Use a wash cloth and scrub into the seams, get the muck out from under your armour!"

There was a chorus of weary huffs and sighs, like his advice was sounding a lot like too much effort to bother with.

"Yeah but the solvents always cold," Longhaul complained. "Those prissy seekers always use it all up-"

"Then work out a schedule!" Ratchet snapped. "There's no excuse for poor hygiene, not when you're on an organic planet. You have to shower. You-!" He pointed at Scavenger, who was covered in dried dirt. "-Need to *marinate* in solvent!"

Another chorus of grumbles. Having endured his ranting long enough -and unlike their Autobot enemies were under no obligation to listen to it- they began to file out the door of his repair bay, splashing through the puddles of drowning wasps.

"You had better be heading to the wash racks!" He bellowed after them, sticking his head out the door. "I see one speck of dirt on any of you tomorrow I'll be getting that hose out again! You hear me?!"

There were rattles and clanks as they started walking faster.

Once they'd turned the corner and left his sight, he stepped back into the repair bay, sighing at the mess, before realising with a start - he had been left alone. Unsupervised. Free to roam their base at will.

He took a step out into the corridor. Then another, wondering if he could make it to the tower, and the surface, somehow swim back to shore from there. He was running on the Decepticon diet of measly half-rations, but if the weather was calm, the currents gentle, he'd stand a chance. If only conditions weren't so impossible to gauge from beneath the ocean...

"Ratch'!" The call of an excited voice bastardising his designation put a halt to any further ideas of escape.

Only one Decepticon would dare to address him so casually.

Skywarp waved to him from the end of the corridor. The next second, he was stood in front of him. Ratchet's optics burned at the flash of light, but he refused to flinch, glowering at the seeker through the purple blobs obscuring his vision.

Skywarp opened his mouth to say something, but stopped when he heard a splash. He looked down to find his thrusters submerged. "Ew," he mumbled, lifting one thruster and giving it a shake. "Someone spring a leak?"

"What do you want?" Ratchet demanded.

Skywarp dug into his subspace and whipped out a tube. He waved it around too erratically for Ratchet to see what it actually was, but from Skywarp's gleeful reaction alone, he could tell it was-

"The lubricant," he sighed.

"The lube is here!" Skywarp thrust it into the air in victory. He brought it down and kissed it. Ratchet shuttered his optics in resignation.

"I trust you know how to use it," he growled, praying to whatever deities who may or may not have existed that the seeker did.

"Duh," Skywarp scoffed.

"Then I'm very happy for you," he deadpanned.

"Be happy for a Thunder," Skywarp actually winked at him -the shameless little brat he was. "We've got a lot of below average 'facing to make up for."

Ratchet cringed, not wanting to ever have to hear the details, "Do you mind?"

"No," Skywarp said simply. "And hey, we ordered in bulk." He tossed another tube to Ratchet.

"What-" Ratchet dangled it between his fingers. "-Do you imagine I'm going to need this for?"

Skywarp shrugged. "I dunno, you're an old mech. Don't you guys start drying up?"

Ratchet felt his temper start to fray, "Now you listen here, you winged grape-"

"I was kidding!" Skywarp slapped his shoulder playfully, optics crinkled at the corners. "I just figured you'd need it for when you had to stick your fingers up someone else's valve."

"Why would I be doing that?!"

"Isn't that what medics do?"

"Not for the Hell of it, no!" Ratchet yelled, but he subspaced the lubricant anyway, just in case.

"And that lubricant isn't going to make the damage *you* inflicted on Thundercracker's internals magically disappear, so go easy on him. I mean it, I see him so much as limp-"

"Hey! I would never hurt TC," Skywarp pointed angrily, all humour gone. As fun and mischievous as he liked to act, he had a temper like any other Con. "Not unless he asks me to."

Ratchet really did not want to continue this conversation any further. He shuttered his optics, holding up a hand in defeat. "Just ...take me back to my cell."

"Forgot the way?" Skywarp teased, but rather than walk him, the seeker took Ratchet's wrist and teleported.

The experience was relatively foreign to Ratchet. He had teleported once before, in his youth, back when the outlier ability hadn't been as rare, but had been much riskier. He recalled the experience with far from fond memories - an awful displacement, not quite like having the rug pulled out from under him, more akin to being stretched across a great distance, like every cell of his frame had been pulled apart, broken down, and rebuilt again in the space of an instant.

Not an experience he had had any desire to repeat.

And yet, Skywarp ...was a very skilled teleporter.

Ratchet only had to blink and he was back in his room. No otherworldly pain, no nausea inducing side-affects. He glanced at the seeker in surprise.

"What?" Skywarp released him and gave him a nudge towards his berth.

"Nothing," Ratchet shook his helm, rearranging his expression into his patented scowl. "You're not as dumb as you look, you know."

Skywarp took it lightly, smirking. "Yeah well you better get used to my dumb looks cause come tomorrow there's gonna be twice as many me's hanging around."

Ratchet whipped around in horror. "What?"

"Well maybe not me me's, but you know," he shrugged. "More seekers. They're coming in from Cybertron. Shockwave's space-bridging them here for checkups. With you, I guess. They don't wanna waste the opportunity."

"Oh, great!" Ratchet threw up his arms.

"Yeah, it sucks," Skywarp agreed, stepping out through the doors. "Those Rainmakers are a bunch of losers, but me and TC have to move out of *our* quarters and recharge in the air barracks all so *they* can have a private room?! All 'cause Shockwave thinks Screamer's gonna haze them or something."

Ratchet reclined across his berth. "Oh really," he droned in what he hoped was a bored tone.

"I mean who gets court-marshalled for a prank anyway?" Skywarp lingered in the doorway, still complaining. Ratchet would have thrown a pillow over his face- if the one he'd had wasn't damp. "It was one squid! And it was dead anyway! Like Shockwave's never put weird stuff up someone's thruster in an experiment-"

"Skywarp." Ratchet called quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Isn't Thundercracker going to be waiting for you?"

That did the trick. Skywarp grinned, slapped the door panel, and teleported the instant before it sealed shut, off to be another mech's problem.

Ratchet relaxed into the silence. Bliss.

Bikini Wax

Much to Ratchet's mental exhaustion yet more seekers were added to the Decepticon ranks the next cycle. The flock of brightly coloured jets he had come to know had once all looked the same to him, same shape, same size, same brainless personalities, but one glimpse at the airforce sent in from Cybertron put the seekers residing on Earth into perspective.

Because at least they weren't so obnoxiously neon.

Ratchet was stationed in the Repair Bay for the cycle, locked in and told to wait for a winged moron to grace him with their presence. Skywarp had warned him that morning when he'd happily volunteered to bring him his fuel (an excuse to ramble on and on in horrifying detail about how great last night had been for him, "*Can you get friction burns on your spike, Ratch'?*" A conversation that almost resulted in Ratchet launching the little fuel he was given at the seeker's head) that he probably wouldn't get *any* visitors. Shockwave's seekers were likely to treat their Earth visit as a much needed vacation from their endless battles against Elita One's ruthless team, and wouldn't bother with a pointless check up with a medic they had no reason to trust in the first place.

Seeing as he was locked in anyway, Rumble and Frenzy guarding the door (on the other side, thankfully) Ratchet thought he might as well be productive.

He began sorting the medical drawers, his temper flaring every few minutes when he found *another* roll of duct tape and little else of any use. So far he had discovered that the medical stock pile on Earth for the Decepticons were; a medieval looking drill, a bag of stale energon goodies, a tree branch, approximately fifty thousand rolls of duct tape, and a *dead rat*.

He dangled the deceased rodent from his finger tips, wondering why he was surprised, or why he'd even bothered-

Such an horrific state the repair bay was in, his mood actually lifted when the doors swept open. He caught the tail end of the cassette twins snickering out in the corridor when his patient stepped in. A seeker, but not one of the ones he had expected.

Starscream stood in the doorway, at first not recognisable *as* Starscream for the state of disrepair he was in. His cockpit was still stubbornly held together with strips of duct tape, but more noticeable than that was the dullness of his armour, the gauntness of his face, fiery optics fuzzed faintly and pathetically. He was a shadow of his usual glamorous, bombastic self, and he knew it, his claws sheathed and his wings flopped low, vaguely reminding Ratchet of a wet, angry kitten.

"Oh, Starscream..." Ratchet sighed. "Don't you look radiant today."

Starscream's lip curled. "I have no time for sarcasm, medic. Can't you see I'm in the middle of a medical *emergency*? My spark could be moments from extinguishing! I require emergency treatment!"

"You're sick, Starscream. You're not dying." Ratchet told him softly, because the seeker did look a tad ...unwell.

"You don't know that," Starscream insisted emotionally, trudging across the repair bay to fling himself (with impressive dramatics for a dying mech) across the examination slab. "It's poison, I just know it. Someone must be trying to kill me. My insides are on *fire*."

Ratchet knew what a poisoning looked like (Megatron, the other day) and this wasn't it. It was either bad fuel, or a virus. And a mild one at that, likely in it's early stages. If it was serious Starscream would be spitting static and walking backwards into walls.

He ignored the lamenting seeker on the examination berth monologuing away to himself about all the things he'd missed out on in life; ruling a planet, possessing his own harem, turning Megatron into his court jester, defeating death - and dusted off a diagnostics machine that looked like it hadn't been online since before his patient had even come off the factory line. He untangled wires and cables and managed to find an outlet that looked like it might fit.

He pinched the edge of one of Starscream's wings to get him to turn over.

Starscream's squeal reminded Ratchet of one Carly had produced when Bumblebee had jumped out at her one Halloween on the *Ark*...

"Those are sensitive, you buffoon!" Starscream cried.

Ratchet didn't apologise, flicking open Starscream's data-port and plugging in. Starscream jumped in surprise and hissed something ungrateful about how rude medics should have their medical licences revoked.

The diagnostics computer was slow, but it found the problem soon enough.

"Just as I thought," Ratchet nodded, glancing through the readouts. "A virus."

Starscream was disgusted. "No!"

"Yes," Ratchet removed the diagnostics jack and opened his own access port to unspool his cable. He plugged it into Starscream and began sorting through the corrupted files. "Hmm."

"What now?" Starscream whined.

Interestingly, the virus had infected the nanites of Starscream's fuel filtration system. The microscopic but vital machines were tasked both with the removal of contaminants in fuel and regulating the charge it carried. It wasn't the sort of virus that could be easily contracted without *very* close contact with another infected party.

There had been an outbreak of a similar sort of virus in Ratchet's days working as a relief medic in Kaon. It had started with energon being in sort supply, syphoned straight from other mecha's fuel lines for re-consumption, and then spread further via internal fluids of a whole *other* sort thanks to the booming pleasure industry at the time.

And seeing as Starscream was unlikely to have been drinking second-hand energon straight from the fuel lines of his comrades-

Ratchet detached himself from the seeker. "First things first; treatment. We're going to have to methodically purge the fuel from your frame and restock you with clean, fresh energon."

Starscream's optic twitched in annoyance. "What do you mean '*we're*' going to purge?" He growled tensely. "Are *you* going to be retching into a bucket as well?"

Ratchet ignored him, "You need to tell Megatron- or Soundwave, or whoever the Pit you've got to whisper your supply requests to, that we need a lot of fresh energon. It's contagious, so you won't be the only one in need of treatment."

Though Starscream *was* a fool without an iota of common sense, but he was still deceptively clever for a Con. His helm snapped up.

"Someone *gave* this to me?!" He hissed angrily. "How?! Has some dirty peon been spitting in the fuel?!"

"It can't be contracted through oral lubricants." Ratchet picked up a data-pad and handed it to Starscream. "I need you to write down the designations of every mecha you've interfaced this past fortnight so I can test them and trace this back to patient zero."

Starscream didn't take the data-pad though. He had gone very still..

Ratchet felt his patience slipping away. "For Primus's sake, it's all confidential. I'm not going to tell anyone the leagues the mecha you've slept with!"

Starscream stood abruptly, such a crazed glint in his optic that Ratchet took a wary step back when he snatched the data-pad from him. Without a word Starscream threw it, like a frisbee, so hard that it imbedded itself in the bulkhead behind Ratchet with a deafening clang.

"Starscream!" Ratchet bellowed, shocked and furious. "What the Pit is wrong with-? Hey! You need treatment!"

"It can wait," Starscream was already marching out the doors.

The door slipped shut and Ratchet threw his arms up in resignation. "Why do I even bother."

He had barely finished speaking when the doors opened again for Starscream, who had done a full one hundred and eighty out in the corridor.

Ratchet folded his arms smugly, "Good, get on the berth-"

Starscream ignored him completely, snatching roughly a dozen rolls of duct tape off the table behind Ratchet before leaving again.

"That won't fix your virus!" Ratchet bellowed after him.

Bored and frustrated, Ratchet continued tidying the repair bay. It took a full half hour for him to get the data-pad out of the wall. Starscream was stronger than he looked.

As he cleaned and organised it occurred to him that the Decepticons were partaking in much more interfacing than he would have expected. And to worsen his concern, he was yet to find any form of anti-viral software, and no protective hardware whatsoever. He'd be delusion to assume every Con was in an exclusive relationship like those two soft seekers were. Starscream was such a little trollop his virus could very easily have spread through the ranks already...

Primus, he had already seen enough Decepticon privates to last him a lifetime.

He was considering how best to broach the subject of how important protection was even for big, bad Decepticons with an officer who might actually listen, when-

When someone wearing ...what at first looked like their own *homemade chastity device* barged into his repair bay with all the furious indignity of a recently branded turbo-bull.

Megatron glowered at Ratchet, shoulders heaving with fast furious breaths. Ratchet stared at Megatron- or rather, at the duct tape encasing the *entirety* of his pelvic region. Someone had absolutely *plastered* the black of his hip and groin armour with the duct tape. *Plastered*.

Now Ratchet was no fool. A furious Starscream had left half a hour ago with as much duct tape as he could physically carry. There was an obvious culprit, and there was an even more obvious motive. Ratchet didn't want to contemplate it, yet there it was, right in front of him.

Megatron, despite the rage pumping through his frame and setting his optics *alight*, was as rundown and dishevelled, gaunt and dull, as he had been the cycle before when he'd scorned Ratchet' concern.

So it wasn't fuel loss he had been suffering from after all.

Now that everything made such horrible sense, Ratchet could have just nodded along and saved Megatron the humiliation of having to explain just *why*, exactly, someone had seen fit to tape his panels down ...but where was the fun in that?

"Is that duct tape there to stop your rusting aft falling apart?" He asked casually.

Megatron's vents gave a low hiss of pressure. "Remove it. *Now*."

Thankfully, the most 'advanced' piece of equipment Ratchet would need were a pair of cutting implements. Megatron couldn't sit because the tape was wound so tightly around his thighs that every step pulled unpleasantly on the sensitive panels beneath, so Ratchet begrudgingly knelt and began snipping and peeling.

It was stuck good, and every strip that he peeled away from armour prompted a twitch from his patient. Doubly so when Ratchet had to prise the evil stuff off Megatron's codpiece.

One piece was fixed hard, and when Ratchet pulled Megatron grunted sharply in pain. He shoved Ratchet him away as if he'd done it on purpose.

"Will you stop being such a delicate little fairy about it?" Ratchet barked, moving to kneel again. "It's only a bit of tape."

It was a poor choice of insults. Megatron did not take kindly to anyone questioning his resilience. Optics sparking with a dangerously foolish idea, Megatron seized an edge of the tape. Before Ratchet could stop him, he yanked forcefully and tore off an entire strip in one go, with a loud, painful *rip*.

Ratchet stared at the pelvic armour before him, bare brushed metal, now completely void of black paint.

Megatron didn't make a sound. He didn't seem capable of it.

"Well," Ratchet clapped his hands to his thighs and climbed to his pedes. "That's an impressive looking bikini wax you've given yourself there."

Megatron braced an arm against the examination slab and exhaled with a shuddering breath. If he'd spoken, Ratchet was sure his vocaliser would have been a full octave higher.

Ratchet almost, *almost* felt sorry for him.

Almost.

It turned out that even a mech like Megatron would lose a great deal of his intimidation value when sat hunched over on Ratchet's examination berth with half his pelvic paint missing and his head buried in a bucket full of regurgitated energon.

"This is lovely," Ratchet commented casually, watching the Lord and Commander of the Decepticon forces clutch at the old tin bucket like it was his only friend in the world.

"I do not have a virus," Megatron protested for the hundredth time.

Bored of hearing the same denial over and over again, Ratchet sent another wireless command into Megatron's frame to force him to purge again. Megatron retched, frame convulsing painfully.

"For the sake of argument, lets say you don't," Ratchet began to pace slowly. "But sate my curiosity and tell me who your interfacing partners are."

Megatron's growl echoed in the bucket.

"Irony," his optics were dangerously bright over the rim of the bucket. 'Starscream was keen to learn the same."

"Starscream has a virus." Ratchet told him, throwing out the book on patient doctor-confidentiality. "It's likely he contracted it through interfacing with another infected party."

"So he immediately assumes *I* was the one to give it to *him*?!" Megatron demanded, clearly insulted.

"Your virus is in a later stage," Ratchet said simply. "You contracted it and gave it to him."

"Impossible."

"Why?!"

"Because I haven't- !" Megatron cut off with an angry noise, looking aside. "This is none of your concern."

"Unless you want this thing to take down your entire faction-"

"I have been with that infuriating pest of a seeker and him *alone*!" Megatron bellowed, with strength to his voice Ratchet had not expected. He flinched back when powerful arms gestured angrily, the bucket tipping worryingly in his grasp, "I barely have time to bed *him*, let alone anyone else! Who does he imagine I contracted it from?!"

Ratchet didn't know the answer to that.

Megatron was a thoroughly unpleasant person to be around, and Ratchet absolutely hated him, no question about it. But for all his faults and megalomania, Megatron didn't strike him as a liar. For starters, the old fool didn't have the imagination for it.

Ratchet thought for a moment, absently firing off another command to force Megatron into another purge. As the retching started and he heard the gruesome crash of liquid hitting the bottom of the bucket, a thought popped into Ratchet's processor.

"Who refuelled you, after Starscream attacked you with the harpoon?"

Megatron made a weary noise into the bucket, "He didn't attack me..."

It wasn't the question Ratchet had asked, but he was in no rush, and he was *insanely* curious about the impossible theory behind Megatron somehow, *someway*, being intimate with Starscream of all mechs. And seeing as Megatron's virus seemed to have loosened his tongue...

"What is shooting someone with a harpoon if not attacking them?"

"The weapon was knocked off his workstation," Megatron groaned, lifting his helm and swiping a hand across his forehead, his optics shuttered. "It fired when it hit the floor. An unfortunate accident."

Ratchet wasn't buying it. "And what about Starscream's injuries? You punished him for an accident?"

"I didn't *punish* him," Megatron hissed impatiently, voice stained and weary. "He found my predicament greatly assuming. He laughed so hard he fell off the workstation and landed on his cockpit. Blasted fool."

That ...did sound quite believable actually. But it wasn't making sense. All these centuries of rumours, of Megatron's savage cruelty, and Starscream's treacherous assassination attempts...

"His wing?" He recalled the finger dents, the scuffs of black paint marring glossy white.

"Considering the nature of this virus what do you *think* they were caused by?" Megatron snarled angrily. "We have a passionate relationship."

Ratchet cringed, "Bully for you."

Megatron continued though, sensing a rare opportunity to complain, "That idiot seeker has no regard for lab safety protocols. He'll fling me over whatever surface is available, and damn the consequences. What else could have knocked the blasted harpoon to the floor-"

"Alright, alright! I get the picture." Ratchet shuttered his optics wearily, willing the mental images away. He needed to change the subject, quickly. "What about the fuel? After I repaired you?"

"Shockwave bridged it over," Megatron grunted.

"Where from?"

"Wherever he could find it, I imagine."

Ratchet was willing to guess *that* was where the virus had originated, some rusting husk left abandoned on a battlefield on Cybertron, syphoned for fuel without regard for what contaminating slag was in it then pumped straight into their Lord and leader's recovering frame, right along with the virus it carried.

Which was then pumped into Starscream in an entirely different manner.

He shuddered, cursing his crude processor for flinging that picture up again.

"Well that solves that mystery," Ratchet acknowledged. "I'll let Starscream know, I'm sure he'll be thoroughly apologetic."

Megatron snorted.

"And once you're both cleared up and virus free there are a few things I'd like to discuss with you, since you're so agreeable today." Ratchet added, casting Megatron a stern look.

"About what?" Megatron groaned.

"Medical supplies," Ratchet began listing off on his fingers. "Fuel. And prophylactics."

Megatron's brow creased in confusion, "What in the Pit is a prophylactic? Some sort of weapon?"

Ratchet folded his arms, unsurprised. No one would have thought to set up health seminars down in the mines for the lowly labourers. Any early experience *this* poor miner-turned-gladiator would have gotten would have been in the arena itself, courtesy of equally clueless, uneducated fighters.

"Think of it more like a shield," he began, wondering if he was going to need to draw diagrams.

Radioactive Starscream Clone

Evening arrived long before Soundwave managed to locate Ratchet's second errant viral patient under Megatron's orders and drag him out of whatever self-pitying hole he'd hidden himself away in.

Ratchet witnessed Starscream's shrieking, thrashing reappearance in his repair bay in utter awe, wondering what sort of miraculous medical phenomena was at work that was *allowing* Starscream's overtaxed, wheezing systems to fight so fiercely against Soundwave's hold.

Ratchet would have liked to reason with the seeker himself, having some experience in the art of reasoning with The Unreasonable, but he was swiftly removed from his own repair bay shortly afterwards. His protests fell on deaf audials as he was forced to wait out in the corridor whilst Soundwave -hopefully- resolved the situation between them in private.

And that was all assuming it could be solved. And Soundwave wasn't just saving him from the trauma of watching the pair of them trash his repair bay and themselves in the process of working off their frustration with one another.

Ratchet inched closer to the doors and tried to listen for the telltale sounds of smashing glass and clanging armour. Part of him was even feeling a little envious that Soundwave was getting front row seats to what was likely the collapse of *the* most over-the-top, dysfunctional relationship any sentient-being would ever witness, and *he* was missing it.

He couldn't even begin to imagine what a civil conversation might look like between them. He wasn't sure they even *could* communicate with one another in any meaningful way. Starscream was a howling Banshee and Megatron was a stubborn grunting thug.

"So what's the grossest thing you've ever seen?"

Ratchet was torn from his eavesdropping by the mischievous voice below. The cassette twins left to guard him were looking up at him expectantly, identically visored faces morbidly curious.

"This sad excuse of a military base," Ratchet growled, turning back to the door.

It said a lot that he would much rather be inside, with the couple from Hell, ducking thrown projectiles, than out here with these two menaces. At least he knew how to handle Megatron and Starscream. At least *they* were predictable.

These two weren't.

"You ever had to pull something from someone's exhaust?"

"You know the answer to that," Ratchet muttered wearily.

The twins snickered. "Would you believe us if we told you that wasn't the first time that happened to Motormaster?"

Motormaster did seem the type to routinely tick people off to such an extent that they violated him with foreign objects.

"Maybe it's a truck thing?" one of the twins joked.

"Could be," he other answered slyly. "It ever happen to Prime?"

Ratchet's spark swirled unpleasantly at the thought of his friend and leader. He hadn't realised how much he had missed him, him and all his friends. His sadness abruptly transmuted into anger as they laughed at the idea of the Autobot leader in such a compromised position.

"Watch it," He snapped. "Or you'll be limping back to Soundwave will something unpleasant shoved up *your* exhaust."

They weren't particularly cowed by his threat.

"C'mon, Prime can't be that perfect," The twins pressed. "I bet he's had plenty dumb accidents."

"Hard as it may be for you lot to believe, but stupid injuries are a phenomenon unique only to Decepticons," Ratchet bit out.

The twins didn't look to believe him. "You're lying."

"You're so lying."

"You Bots have got plenty dunces on your side too," the blue one insisted. "We've seen them-"

"Well fortunately for those 'dunces' *I* was always around to steer them right," Ratchet planted his hands on his hips and bent towards them.

"Not now you ain't," the red twin said slyly, sharing a look with his brother. "Gotta make you wonder what they're gonna be getting up to without you, huh?"

Oh Primus, Ratchet thought with a sudden sinking feeling. He wasn't there. Were his own idiot twins even still alive? Or had they pranked themselves to an early offlining? Had Prowl finally snapped and pushed them into the engine furnace?

The door opened, and Rumble and Frenzy straightened and stood at attention when Soundwave appeared. His visored gaze swept down and studied his cassettes. If Ratchet didn't know any better he could have sworn they straightened further under his scrutiny, puffing out their little chests. Nice to know they behaved themselves for *him*.

Soundwave said nothing, but the repair bay behind him was eerily silent. So, either the argument had been resolved, or they had finally managed to kill each other in the fallout. Soundwave stepped back, a gesture than implied he wanted Ratchet back in the room.

Ratchet braced himself for the carnage that might have been wrought in his absence. He had envisioned scattered equipment and tipped over furniture, blood up the walls and puddling on the floor.

He moved into the room apprehensively but found it looking much the same as it had when he'd left.

Megatron was sat where he'd left him, and Starscream was stood waiting, positioned standoffishly at the far end of the room. No one was dead, but nothing about their demeanours implied they had 'made up' with one another. Starscream did not look apologetic. Megatron did not look vindicated. They were both just staring at one another, hardly even noticing Ratchet's return.

Staring, in an unnaturally intense way.

Ratchet cleared his vocaliser.

Still, nothing. They didn't even blink.

"Starscream; ready for treatment," Soundwave informed him, filling the silence. He didn't react in the slightest to the weird tension lingering about the repair bay. "When will you release Megatron?"

Release? Ratchet didn't want to show his surprise at learning of his newly appointed power to say when or if *Megatron* could leave. Just a few days ago he'd been snarled at for even daring to suggest the warlord take a nap. He shook off his shock, checking Megatron's readouts.

"Well, he's purged the nasty stuff and the antiviral software I installed is cleaning up the rest," he murmured.

He could release Megatron now and get him out of his sight, but the Decepticon wasn't a young mech by any means. Ratchet didn't want to have to spend the next few cycles lying awake at night wondering if Megatron really had made a proper recovery because the big block-head certainly wasn't going to come back to him on his own free will for anything less than a duct-taped spike.

"A few hours more," he said. "Just for observation."

Megatron grumbled his wordless displeasure but was wise enough to know not to protest any further.

No, the *protests*, came from Starscream.

"No, he can't stay in here!" he screeched. "Get him out! I want private treatment! I am not letting you mortify me in front of him."

Such a loving, trusting relationship they had.

"I'll draw a curtain," Ratchet rolled his optics.

Starscream's wings went ramrod straight. "No."

"I will monitor Lord Megatron's condition in your stead," Soundwave offered before the argument could escalate. "Soundwave; will keep you informed of any changes."

Megatron looked even less pleased with that prospect, but Starscream at least, was continent- and Ratchet supposed that was the important thing.

"Yes, good," the seeker flapped a limp wrist at Soundwave. "Take him away. I don't need my medic being distracted by the likes of him."

Ratchet ignored Starscream. Watching Megatron wearily push himself off from the berth. His movements were slow and sluggish, like he didn't quite have the strength to manoeuvre his own massive frame. Ratchet half expected Soundwave to reach out and help him, before remembering they were Decepticons and such a gesture would only be taken as an insult.

"Take a nap and let the anti-virus do it's job," Ratchet advised. "No stomping around and starting fights."

Megatron flashed him a look that would have half his faction rattling in their armour and springing leaks. Ratchet had far worse things to be scared off than a rundown old warlord who'd been

through the ringer twice in under a week.

Megatron, as always, remained a tough old bastard to kill. This invincible nightmare of a mech. The bane of so many Autobots' lives. But as Ratchet was beginning to realise, he was as vulnerable as any Cybertronian.

And for some reason that knowledge didn't fill Ratchet with quite as much joy as he would have hoped it would.

He waited until the two larger Cons were gone before turning on Starscream, steeling himself before facing with the worst patient in recorded history.

"Alright twinkle-toes," he slapped the top of the examination berth and waved him over. "Pick a bucket and turn off your taste receptors - you've got purging to do."

Being up half the night with Starscream did little to improve Ratchet's outlook on life the next morning. His fuel was delivered at what he imagined was the start of the morning shift rotation, a time no mech who'd been up until the early hours watching someone puke and swear, and puke and insult his ancestors, and puke and cry, and then puke some more, should have seen.

Even the marginally less infuriating sight of Thundercracker's face in his doorway did nothing to improve his mood.

"Skywarp said something about you wanting to see me," Thundercracker handed him his half cube.

Ratchet rubbed an optic with the back of his hand. He couldn't recall making any such request. "Why?"

"Something about you wanting to see me walk?" Thundercracker said, sounding as unsure as Ratchet felt.

Until the medic thought back to a previous conversation he had had with Skywarp, regarding the vigorousness of his extracurriculars with Thundercracker. "*I see him so much as limp-*"

At least he was taking his threats seriously, Ratchet thought with a grimace, taking a sip of his cube.

"I don't need to see you walk," he muttered.

Blissfully clueless, Thundercracker nodded. "I heard about Starscream."

"Oh, that's hit the rumour mill too has it?" Ratchet had to appreciate the speed at which gossip could travel through the Decepticon ranks. It put the Autobot's gossip mongering to shame.

"No, he's managed to keep it pretty quiet. I only know because of-" Thundercracker tapped his chest plates. "Trine, you know?"

Ratchet squinted in interest. His knowledge regarding the spark how it worked was almost entirely medical. He knew the basic theory behind how a bond formed and was sustained, but the complexities and varieties of those bonds escaped him. He had heard before that some flight

frames -not entirely just seekers- were able to create such deep platonic relationships that their sparks could link together.

He had dismissed it as hippie nonsense at the time.

He still wasn't entirely sure it *wasn't* just hippie nonsense. He was talking to Thundercracker after all.

He drank the rest of his cube, "Your Cybertronian-based counterparts didn't make it to my repair bay yesterday. Know why?"

Thundercracker, surprisingly, looked aside, embarrassed. "Yeah, well, Sunstorm's with them. Get's into guys heads sometimes. About the 'Healing Of Primus' and stuff."

"What the Pit has Primus got to do with hiding from a medic?" Ratchet grouched.

Thundercracker pinned him with a grave look. "Oh," he began solemnly, "You don't know."

Ratchet was rapidly losing patience. "Know what?!"

Ratchet had heard Sunstorm referred to as a 'Starscream Clone' by more than one passing Decepticon, both scornfully and casually, making it difficult for Ratchet to discern if it was intended as an insult or, somehow, a simple fact.

Then he saw the spectacle for himself.

Sunstorm lived up to his designation and reputation, literally lighting up whatever room he graced with his radioactive presence. He was gold from the rims of his thrusters right up to the tips of his straight edged wings, emitting a poisonous, rippling halo of light. The temperature of any room he entered soared upwards not just from the heat of his radiation, but the rising cores and pumping vents of the many Decepticons with a healthy appreciation for an attractive seeker in his vicinity.

And Sunstorm really was a Starscream clone, more similar to him -somehow- than any of the other mass-produced seekers were to each other. Same smirk, same optics, same enviously symmetrical facial structure, same below average height.

Same magnetic personality too...

"Self righteous prude," Astrotrain muttered at Ratchet's shoulder.

Now permitted the reward of socialising with the other occupants of the base during fuelling, Ratchet was currently sandwiched between the two massive triple-changers, Astrotrain and Blitzwing, during the morning refuel. Despite their much larger frames, they each held a cube hardly any bigger than the standard energon ration, a fact Ratchet was about to fire himself up over when Astrotrain's grunted insult had him looking up.

Shockwave's seekers had arrived, led, unsurprisingly, by Sunstorm. No rank, not even a trine, and yet, somehow, the golden seeker held more unofficial sway over the Cybertronian airforce than Starscream did over his own forces on Earth.

Enough sway to stop any of them from seeing a medic, anyway.

"Oh yeah, like you *wouldn't*," Blitzwing reached over Ratchet's helm to nudge Astrotrain

playfully.

"Didn't say I wouldn't," Astrotrain nudged him back twice as roughly. Ratchet ducked in annoyance. "Just that's he's a jerk. He's still hot-"

"He's *radioactive*," Ratchet reminded them sternly.

"Frag yeah he is," Blitzwing rumbled appreciatively, setting his chin on his fist with a dreamy smile. "He could melt my armour any cycle."

Ratchet sighed into what remained of his cube, no longer able to tell what was even a joke anymore with these idiots. He had spent all of half an hour in the company of the huge transport mechs and the entirety of their conversational range revolved around who they *would* and who they *wouldn't*.

Frag, that was.

And so far there wasn't a single spark residing on the sunken base than wasn't worthy of taking a ride of a whole other sort aboard the triple-changer express.

It was worse than dealing with untapped mechlings. Unlike the vast majority of Con's Ratchet had so far dealt with, they clearly weren't getting a lot of intimate attention. If they starting ranking the seekers' attractiveness with numbers, Ratchet was going to have to drench their laps in his energon.

Still, he couldn't sit idly by and let them lust over Sunstorm of all mecha.

"You know who wouldn't short out your circuits just by standing a hundred yards away but is every bit that radioactive buttercups match?" Ratchet said, trying to save them from a horrific, radioactive death.

The two mech's playful expressions abruptly evaporated. "If you're gonna say Screamer, he's not hot."

Ratchet leaned back between them to give them a long, judgmental stare. "Oh, isn't he?"

"I mean..." Astrotrain dropped his voice to a whisper and bent close to Ratchet's audial. "He's pretty hot, yeah, but, you know-"

"He couldn't kill you with just a touch and that makes him less desirable?" Ratchet guessed.

"You can't think about Screamer like that," Blitzwing protested, staring at him like *he* was the one with the death-wish. "You can't *think* about him at all."

"If Soundwave caught us he'd order Hook to disable our optics," Astrotrain nodded solemnly. "Happened to Blast Off a couple months ago. Spent a whole week walking into the bulkheads..."

"For *thinking* about Starscream?" Ratchet wondered how anyone would even know.

"For thinking about Starscream like *that*," Blitzwing looked around, paranoid. "But there ain't nothing stopping us from from thinking about other jets, like Sunstorm."

"As your acting medic you realise I have to strongly advise you against pursuing him," Ratchet said sternly, even if a dark part of him did wonder what sort of injuries would come from a romp with Sunstorm. Horrifyingly half-melted armour, likely.

"So, who else is just as yellow but nowhere near as environmentally poisonous?" Ratchet surveyed

the seekers. "That one there."

He pointed to the neon yellow seeker among the Rainmakers, standing unadvisedly close to Sunstorm, almost like she were trying to emulate him.

"Nova Storm?" Astrotrain said dejectedly. "Think Slipstream'd throat punch me if I even smiled at her. Besides, not like Sunstorm's even open to that sort of thing. Thinks any kind of casual 'facing is like spitting in Primus's face."

"Oh yes, I've heard," Ratchet muttered grumpily. "That, and any sort of medical intervention."

"Who cares what he thinks," Blitzwing shouldered him in camaraderie, but as Ratchet was less than a third his size he came close to toppling out of his seat. "So he's preaching about stuff like Primus's Healing and essential armour oil and meditative repair-trances, who cares."

"I care!" Ratchet stuck a finger in the air, "How am I meant to do my job if I'm being prevented from even giving them checkups? They could have virus's! They could be dying! Or worse, they could be *gestating* something since none of you flying trashcans seem to know what a blasted contraceptive is!"

Blitzwing and Astrotrain mouthed the word at each other in confusion, which said it all really.

Ratchet threw back the last dregs of his fuel, setting his optics on his newest glowing golden target.

A medic had his pride, dammit, and he wasn't leaving this base until he'd inspected every last one of those seekers, Sunstorm's beliefs be damned.

Getting In Deep

To Ratchet's complete and utter lack of surprise, Starscream paid him yet another unannounced visit.

It meant he was going to be nursing a processor ache by the evening. No one had had such a detrimental effect of his mental health since Sunstreaker and Sideswipe in their first years as frontline warriors.

"Why do I feel like I see you every day?" Ratchet demanded, slapping a servo to Starscream's forehead before the whining jet could get his first complaint out. "How're you feeling?"

Starscream, in a stunning show of patience, didn't smack the offending hand away and shriek threats at Ratchet for having dared to lay hands on his perfect person. Instead he glowered at Ratchet and veered out of reach, sidestepping around him to get to the examination berth.

"I have been better," he stated diplomatically

What a pleasant surprise it was that Starscream was acting vaguely civil today. Maybe he wouldn't be getting processor ache after all.

Ratchet followed him, eyeing the walking insult that was his duct-taped cockpit roof. "Have you finally decided to let me fix that?"

"What?" Starscream looked down at himself. "I told you before, it's *fine*, you old fusspot. There's nowhere it can be replaced at any rate and I'm not walking around with the seats uncovered. That'd be asking for trouble. No one on this blasted planet knows how to keep their hands to themselves."

"Megatron?" Ratchet guessed.

"Humans!" Starscream spat, "I can't bask in the sun on this planet for five minutes without hoards of them appearing and trying to clamber all over my wings."

Ratchet had visions of Starscream parking himself in his oh-so-subtle fighter jet alt-mode in supermarket car parks and along the sides of busy road. He decided to move on.

"What's wrong with you now then?"

Starscream boosted himself up onto the berth, legs swinging off the edge in a deceptively playful manner, and stuck out a hand. At first Ratchet thought the deluded seeker wanted him to kiss it, before Starscream wiggled a digit, drawing attention to the claw.

Ratchet snatched the hand up and drew it close to inspect it. "Well, would you look at that. A broken claw."

"It's hideous isn't it," Starscream agreed, not picking up on the sarcasm.

Ratchet dropped his hand, "I'm not your personal beautician, Starscream. I remove virus's. I repair damage. I do *not* do *manicures*."

"This is an injury!" Starscream yelled, pointing at it damningly. "I am in *pain*-!"

"If your claws weren't so ridiculously long you wouldn't haven't broken it in the first place!"

Starscream's cheeks warmed with energon. "Fine. I see how it is." He pushed himself off the berth. "Refuse me treatment due to your baseless predjudices-"

Ratchet's optics wanted to roll out of his helm. "Prejudiced because you're a dirty Con? If I weren't treating you because of your allegiances I wouldn't have treated anyone here *at all*-"

"Don't act like it has anything to do with politics," Starscream hissed, whirling on him, his broken claw extended, condemning. "You ground-pounders are all the same, looking down on us flight frames-"

Ratchet held up a servo to stop him, "Right! That is it. I will not be accused of frame-type discrimination by some high-caste priss looking for a free manicure-"

"Then why haven't I seen a single seeker receive treatment from you?"

Ratchet was about to throw out Thundercracker's name- but unlike the majority of his faction, that poor mech's ailment had not been a result of his own stupid decisions (Skywarp's, yes. But his own? No) and it didn't feel fair to toss his name out just to score points in an argument with *Starscream* of all mechs.

"I treated you when there was actually something wrong with you," Ratchet stowed his temper and decided to battle melodrama with reason on the off chance that it might actually work for once. "Your airforce haven't been seeing me because *someone* has been dissuading them."

"Nonsense," Starscream sniffed.

"Sunstorm."

Starscream narrowed his optics, a flash of realisation crossing his features.

"...I see. Well, if they haven't the sense to utilise your expertise while we have you perhaps they deserve to become infested with spark slugs and contract a rust rash."

"I'll cut you a deal," Ratchet ground out, hardly believing he was going to suggest this. "I fix your poorly little claw, and you bring me some actual patients."

Starscream thought about it for a moment.

He strode back over to Ratchet, helm high, and stuck out his chipped claw. "Deal. Now hurry up and fix it."

Ratchet filled his time trying to make some sense of the haphazard medical records the Decepticons kept. After complaining that he wouldn't be able to be any kind of effective medic if he knew next to nothing of his patient's medical history, Soundwave had been kind enough to send his cassettes to dump fifteen crates full of "files" inside his repair bay.

Upon cracking open the first crate, Ratchet was presented with a box full to the brim with junk.

"What the-?" he pulled out a dismembered servo with a tag hanging off it. The tag read, '*Barricade's Left*' in hastily scribbled glyphs, and nothing else.

"Very helpful." He muttered, setting it aside.

It was, thankfully, the only body part among the filing, but the bottom of the crate was littered with loose bolts and screws, and the data-pads were all full of random, unhelpful "medical notes" notes like, '*Blackout flew into a skyscraper*' and '*Breakdown's optic fell out, again*'.

Ratchet set the crate aside, realising, with great frustration, that the Decepticon's alphabetised method of organisation was to just shove everything with the same first initial into one box and let it be someone else's problem later.

His problem.

It was amazing to him that any of these mechs still functioned without properly trained medics, apathetic command staff, and such poor record keeping.

"I hate them," he said, plucking *used* bullets out of the bottom of the crate. "I hate all of them."

"Uh?" a sheepish voice called from outside his repair bay, followed by a quiet knock. "Is anyone in there?"

Ratchet jumped to his pedes, happy to discard his misguided attempt at organising the chaos of Decepticon administration to treat a real patient. The door opened and a bright yellow seeker peaked in around the doorframe. One of Shockwave's seekers, and a Rainmaker at that. Ratchet remembered her designation as Nova Storm from his conversation with the Triple Changers.

"Finally," Ratchet planted his hands on his hips. "Get in here then. Let's see what's wrong with you."

"Nothing's wrong with me," she said, sounding confused as to why she was here. "The commander cornered me in the wash-racks and said if I valued my health I should come here."

Ratchet nodded, thinking that was rather sensible advice from Starscream.

Until Nova Storm continued with, "Because if I didn't, he said he was going to have Skywarp light a grenade in my cockpit."

Ratchet hummed, thinking that sounded *much* more like the Second in Command he had come to know and wondered why he'd gotten his hopes up. He found it hard to criticise the method when the result was effective though.

"He's not wrong," was all he said, gesturing for Nova Storm to lay down.

At first glance Nova Storm was in fairly good condition -which he had come to expect from vain seekers. Unlike some of their comrades they paid close attention to their daily maintenance and kept themselves impeccably clean. However, a deeper inspection found some issues.

Her armour was some of the strongest Ratchet had ever encountered, made of denser, more durable materials than even Megatron's. It was a decent explanation for why she was able to stand so close to Sunstorm without bursting into flames. Highly resistant and non-corroding as it was, it required a diet high in metals and minerals. Something few Decepticons were getting.

"You have a mineral deficiency," he said, after testing the chemical makeup of her fuel.

Nova Storm sat up and made to climb off the berth, "Okay. Bye."

Ratchet did a double take. "*Where* do you think you're going?"

Nova Storm blinked at him cluelessly, halfway to the door, "I thought you were done?"

"With the examination. Not the treatment."

Nova Storm's optics became big and wide. "You're actually going to *treat* it?"

"What did you think I was going to do?!" Ratchet yelled. "Tell you to ignore the problem and hope it goes away!? Pray to Primus and ask *him* to deal with it? Use some of Sunstorm's essential fragging oils?!"

"But sometimes they actually wor-"

"No they don't work!" Ratchet roared. "Lie down!"

Nova Storm laid back so quickly her wings made a loud clanging noise against the top of the berth.

Finally, at least someone was starting to show him the fear and respect he deserved.

Ratchet saw to Ion Storm and Acid Storm shortly after their trine-mate, and had to assume Starscream was working his way through the seekers trine by trine. The Rainmakers weren't exactly bringing up the average intelligence of the Decepticon base, but they seemed much less accident prone and didn't possess half as much of an attitude as the rest of their Earth-based ilk.

In short, they behaved themselves, and it was such a rare treat that Ratchet found himself expressing much more patience with them than he would have had he been dealing with the likes of Ramjet, or blasted Starscream again.

He even refrained from insulting Acid Storm when he was told of the seeker's struggles being unable to properly control his exceptionally dangerous and environmentally hazardous outlier ability.

"Accidentally creating acid rain indoors is not a medical problem," Ratchet patted his bright shoulder kindly. "You're just incompetent."

Acid Storm nodded in understanding and went on his merry way.

Four million years they'd been at war with these imbeciles. Why hadn't they won yet?

The one mech answer to *that* question snuck up on him that evening in his own quarters -or rather, his prison cell.

Ratchet had only just collapsed across his berth, fatigued, not by his workload, but from the sheer mental strength it took to summon so much patience and understanding in a place where he had so little authority to implement any effective and vastly needed change.

He threw an arm across his optics with a weary sigh.

When one of the shadows shifted.

"Argh!" He shot up, scrambling for the weapon he had long ago lost to his captives to defend

himself from whatever nightmarish monster that lived in the depths of the sunken ship had slipped into his quarters to disembowel him.

Soundwave's visor glowed silently out of the shadows.

"Oh for-" Ratchet dropped his helm into his hands with a groan, fuel pump still beating rapidly. "Don't tell me I have to teach you basic social etiquette now too."

"Negative."

"What do you want?" Ratchet snarled. "I may be a prisoner, but if you want me to cooperate you have to start treating me with some respect. I don't stand around that hole you call a repair bay all cycle waiting for idiots to come and see me just so you can ignore office hours and choose to pounce on me in the middle of the night when I'm trying to recharge!"

Soundwave did not respond.

"Well!" Ratchet pressed. "What is it!? What's so dire it couldn't possibly wait? Another potato?! Another *broken claw*!? Or maybe Megatron's been swimming in a pool of other mech's fluids and gotten himself another virus?! Spit it out, for Primus's sake!"

Soundwave took a step into the light, and no longer framed by the menacing darkness he looked a little less like a maniac waiting for prey in the shadows and a little more like a mech just as weary and run down as Ratchet felt. The line of Soundwave's shoulders were low, his visor faded around the edges. His hands were flexing in and out of fists at his sides.

For a mech like Soundwave, it was the equivalent of an embarrassing lack of emotional control. "I ...require assistance."

Ratchet bit the meshy inside of his cheek. Had it been anyone else he might have folded sympathetically at the plea for help. But not Soundwave.

"What is it? Accidentally deleted your intimidation protocol when you threw out the rest of your emotions?"

"Negative." Soundwave lifted his helm, "I am ...experiencing processor aches."

Ratchet wanted to say, 'yeah, you and me both'.

"Probably those cassettes running around like lunatics all the time," Ratchet muttered, unable to repress the wave of sympathy this time. He knew what it felt like to be the only tired old grump in the room. "They with you now?"

Soundwave nodded.

Ratchet moved to stand in front of Soundwave, hands on his hips, eyeing the compartment of Soundwave's chest. He couldn't hear any ruckus at present, but that didn't mean they weren't creating it. Listening closely he could detect the clicks and rattles of their cassette alt-modes shifting against each other.

With a scowl Ratchet banged his knuckles against the clear casing of Soundwave's chest and yelled at the top of his voice, "Shut up in there, you little monsters. You're driving your carrier to the brink!"

Soundwave stepped back, his visor brightening. "Cassettes; not entirely the cause."

Ratchet stroked his chin. "Starscream?"

Soundwave nodded.

"Megatron?"

A pause, but then another nod.

"The airforce?"

A firm nod.

"Everyone?"

Soundwave looked down at his pedes.

Ratchet felt a feeling again, a increasingly common feeling he was growing to hate: sympathy.

"You're not like the rest of these idiots, and you know what the problem is?" Ratchet gave him a stern look. "Them. They're the problem. And you need a break."

"I cannot abandon my post."

"You're going to *implode* at your post if you don't get away from it for a while," Ratchet wasn't going to listen to any of that self-sacrificing 'others depend on me' nonsense. "There are dozens of extra seekers here, sat around on their afts doing nothing, so no one is going to be short handed if you're not around. As a medic I am officially prescribing you 'A Break'."

Soundwave was shaking his helm.

"Yes," Ratchet growled. "Go on, tell Megatron you're going to Cybertron. You can spend a long boring week with Shockwave. Doctors orders."

Interestingly, something about what he'd said seemed to perk Soundwave up enough to change his mind. He straightened. "...If that is your official advice?"

"Yes," Ratchet waved at him, wanting him to hurry up and leave him alone.

Soundwave nodded gratefully and strode for the door. He paused before he left though, and turned to say something Ratchet had yet to hear from any Decepticon he had treated so far.

"Thank you."

Ratchet blinked.

"...You're welcome."

Ratchet sat on his berth heavily after he had left, hands clasped together tightly in his lap.

Primus help him. He was getting in deep now.

Ratchet's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Morning

Ratchet wasn't important enough by any means to know the extensive day-to-day happenings of the Decepticon's disgusting little base, so he could only assume that Soundwave had taken his advice to Megatron and been permitted temporary sanity-preserving leave for the absolute carnage he woke up to the next day.

He was taken to be fuelled three times (and only managed a little sip of the second half-cube he was given before the guilt of taking more of what little they had than he had a right too overwhelmed him and he refused the additional rations), he was walked through a flood on the second floor that came up to his knees, and he watched in horror as the usually sedate morning atmosphere of the mess hall deteriorated into an all out brawl before his very optics all because Vortex tweaked one of Acid Storm's wings.

The helicopter had said something and laughed, and Ratchet could only presume he deserved the punch that Nova Storm whirled around and buried in his face. Ratchet watched the seekers clash in the flurry of wings and claws with the Combaticons, well aware that every scrape, clang, and *thunk* was an injury he was going to have to deal with later.

Fights on the *Ark* were broken up fairly quickly. No one would tolerate them, and there certainly wouldn't be Autobots sitting idly by as their comrades punched the scrap out of each other as the Decepticons here were.

As *he* was.

Ratchet snapped himself out of his apathetic stupor and rushed into the fray, ignoring Breakdown's concerned cry as he slipped his grasp.

"Stop!" he bellowed, plunging his hand into the flurry and trying with all his might to pull Onslaught off the seeker he had crushed beneath him. "Stop it, all of you!"

His words did little until Onslaught, irritated by the insistent yanking of his shoulder armour, jabbed an elbow backwards sharply. It seemed to come out of nowhere and nailed Ratchet right in the face. His next plea for sanity caught in his vocaliser as he stumbled back with the blow, landing heavily on his aft, liquid heat blooming across his face as energon poured from his olfactory.

"Ratch'!"

Optics shuttered and hands thrown up to cover the damage done to his face, it took Ratchet a second to realise how eerily silent things had gone. Tentatively, he winked online a watery optic, keeping his hand flush to his face to stem the flow of energon.

A dozen pairs of frightened red optics were staring at him. Onslaught had released the seeker he had been tormenting and was now crouched in front of him, hands aloft.

"I- I didn't know it was you-"

"You've done it now, Onslaught!" Someone snapped.

"It was an accident!" Onslaught yelled, and ignored how Ratchet flinched away from his hands when he took him by the shoulders and hauled him back to his pedes. Ratchet slapped his hands away from his frame as Onslaught tried to dust him off.

"Get off me!" He snarled, as angry at himself for getting involved as he was with them for starting it. He should have just left them to beat one another to bloody scrap. What did he care.

Onslaught's mouth was working silently, "I- I'm-

"Don't bother," Ratchet snarled, pinching his nasal ridge and flapping his free hand to get the other watching Decepticons to back off. "Go on, go back to ripping each other to shreds!"

The subdued mechs were passing shifting glances between each other and floor. None of them apologised, not even the half-assed sort of mumble he could sometimes wrangle out of Sunstreaker- someone who regularly lost his temper and lashed out.

That was the difference between them, Ratchet reminded himself. That Autobots knew when they'd done wrong and would try to repent.

Con's didn't know a damn thing about repentance.

"You wanna go back to your room?" Breakdown asked softly, walking a few paces behind him.

"No," Ratchet snapped. "The repair bay." He eyed the Decepticon through his aching optics. "You any good at taking orders?"

"Depends who's giving them," Breakdown grumbled honestly.

"Good enough."

Breakdown was surprisingly attentive and steady handed, not so much so that he would make a good medic himself, but enough that he could follow Ratchet's directions and re-seal the gash across his nasal ridge. Without any decent pain relief Ratchet was going to have to suffer the hot, aching throb of his damaged facial derma until his self repair got to it though. At least Onslaught hadn't broken anything. Ratchet didn't think the broken-nose look would suite him. That was a unique style only a scowling ex-gladiator like Megatron could really pull off.

"I think that's sealed," Breakdown murmured, and flipped around one of his own wing mirrors so Ratchet could check his reflection out.

Too practical to bother with vanity, Ratchet gave his handiwork a firm nod. "You'd make a good assistant."

Breakdown looked away, "I don't know about that."

"I could use some help here," Ratchet pressed. "There's only one of me, and no one here seems to want to go to Hook and Scrapper for the ...delicate stuff."

Breakdown nodded, "They ain't what anyone would call professional. They can reattach a limb good as new, but, you don't really want them rooting around inside you."

"Can't say I blame you," Ratchet muttered.

"I can hold people down though," Breakdown announced proudly. "Stop them moving around and screaming when you're trying to work on them."

"*Lovely*," Ratchet nodded. "I'll call you when I next need someone to sit on Starscream. I'm going to get that little idiot a new cockpit if it kills me."

Breakdown moved towards the exit, but he paused in the doorway, "For what it's worth, I'm sorry you got hit in the face."

Ratchet paused inspecting his tools. Without turning to face Breakdown he nodded acceptingly. "Alright."

"See ya later, Ratch'."

Ratchet set down his tools and sighed when he heard the door shut. Fine. Maybe not *every* Decepticon was so far beyond help...

He wasn't left to his own devices for long- never was in this Pit- and within the hour two seekers came wandering into his repair bay. Coneheads. Decidedly *sheepish* looking Coneheads. Two he had recognised from the morning brawl.

Their gazes were fixed to the floor and they repeatedly flicked their wings like they were using them to communicate, gesturing at each other with them in a similar way to how two people might try to nudge one another forward to speak first.

Ratchet leant back against the berth and folded his arms. "Here to apologise?"

They glanced up in confusion. "For what?" The red one frowned, sounding argumentative.

Ratchet rolled his optics. Of course...

"There's something wrong with Dirge," the other one stepped forward. "He won't get out of berth. Hasn't even fuelled."

Ratchet didn't blame Dirge. What was there to get out of berth for around here?

"Is he damaged or just sick?"

"We dunno," the red one said crossly. "He just won't get up. And if he doesn't for manoeuvres in the next breem, there's definitely gonna be something wrong with him when Screamer gets ahold of him."

"I see your dilemma," Ratchet pushed away from the berth. "Bring him in-"

"He won't get out of berth," the red seeker repeated angrily. "Aren't you listening?! You have to come to him."

Having already been hit in the face once today, Ratchet stuffed down his temper before answering in a tense, strained voice, "I can't treat him without my equipment."

"You don't need to treat him," the other seeker pointed out. "We just need you to scare him back to himself."

"What?!"

"He does this all the time. Sometimes Soundwave can snap him out of it but he's gone on *vacation*." The red seeker explained, sounding annoyed. "He gets into these moods and decides he doesn't want to do anything and that he doesn't care what happens to him, and then Screamer comes down on him and slags him for insubordination, and then-"

"Alright, I get the picture," Ratchet held up a hand, hearing the edge of growing panic in the seeker's voice. They didn't want their trine-mate getting hurt, and Ratchet completely believed that Starscream would go around beating his own seekers up for perceived insubordination. Decepticon High Command shared a management style it seemed.

"I'll see what I can do."

The Air Barracks were luxuriously clean compared to what Ratchet had seen of the rest of the base so far. The rows of bunks were tidy and well kept, and the lighting worked without flickering or annoying buzzing noises. It was dry and warm, and the fishy, rusty smell that lingered about the rest of the complex was noticeably fainter.

Ratchet and his fellow Autobots had often joked that Megatron had a soft spot for seekers. Their assumptions were obviously well founded, because the airforce's accommodation was by far the nicest Ratchet had seen of any Decepticons yet.

At the very end of the rows sat an occupied berth, with an obvious seeker-sized lump under the sheets and a wing sticking out from underneath. Ratchet sighed at the sight.

"What's his designation again?" he asked the red Conehead.

"Dirge."

Ratchet walked the length of the barracks until he reached the end berth. He took a seat on it's edge and watched the soft up and down movements of the sheets as the seeker cycled air beneath it. The wing twitched, a sign of nervousness.

"Dirge?" he called, as gentle as he could manage with a Decepticon, "You awake?"

The covers shifted in a way that implied the mech beneath them was nodding.

Ratchet shuttered his optics in resignation. In all his time as a war medic he never dreamed he would one day be reduced to trying to coax a *grown* Decepticon *warrior* out of his berth like a doting creator trying to convince their rebellious offspring that they needed to go to school.

"You hurt?"

A shake.

"You sick?"

A pause. Then another shake.

"You're not gonna get him up with that softly-softly approach," the red jet called behind him. "Give him a shot. Threaten to amputate his wings. *Do* something."

Ratchet ignored him, reaching to pull the sheets aside. They fell down and Dirge's faint red optics peered out at him, faded and sad. Ratchet felt his spark sink a little at the pathetic sight of him.

"I'm not doing the manoeuvres," Dirge said softly, turning his face into the padding to escape Ratchet's gaze. "I don't care what they do to me. I can't do it."

"You have to!" His trine-mate had walked halfway towards them to yell.

Dirge shuttered his optics and said nothing. Ratchet released the sheet and let it fall across his face again.

"What are you doing?"

"Leaving him be," Ratchet stood up. "If he says he can't do it, he can't do it."

"He's just depressed," the red jet argued. "Tomorrow he'll be fine. You'll see-"

"Then leave him till tomorrow-"

"But Starscream-!"

"I will deal with Starscream."

The two seekers stared at him in disbelief.

"What are *you* going to do?" The red one recovered enough to challenge him. "How're you going to protect him from Screamer? You couldn't even protect yourself from Onslaught's elbow."

Nose still aching duly, Ratchet chose to ignore that remark, moving past them.

"If Starscream wants to run his airforce ragged every cycle with unnecessary and ridiculous flight manoeuvres then he'd better start fuelling them enough to do it. He's exhausted," Ratchet pointed back at the shifting lump beneath the covers. "And I'm not playing any part in exacerbating his condition by bullying him out of berth and into the sky. You hear me!"

The seekers were taken aback, they stepped aside and let him pass. "But when Screamer-"

"I told you, *I* will deal with Starscream. All I need from you is to take me to him."

They didn't it take him to Starscream's quarters, apparently he wouldn't be there. Ratchet was about to ask where the blasted Air Commander would be, but now knowing what he knew, Ratchet immediately started to regret asking to be taken to him.

"Screamer doesn't recharge in his quarters," Ramjet (unfortunate designation, Ratchet had thought when they'd finally introduced themselves) explained, sounding a tad peeved. "He can't recharge in his quarters."

"Full of science stuff," Thrust elaborated (again, an unfortunate name). "There's no room for a berth."

"He uses it like some private lab," Ramjet rolled his optics. "Like he doesn't *already* have one of those."

Ratchet's processor began to wander at what might be in that lab and if it could be of any use to him in his repair bay. "Where does he recharge?" Ratchet almost didn't want to ask. "I'm guessing its not in the airbarracks. He wouldn't lower himself to sharing his space."

The jets laughed at him, for a long time, like he had told the funniest joke. And Ratchet knew why when his worst suspicions were confirmed and he found himself standing before the door to the Command Quarters of the base. He sighed.

"What a surprise," he growled.

They stopped in front of it, but neither jet moved to press the door comm. Ratchet looked between them in confusion, before reaching for it himself. Ramjet caught his wrist before he could.

"Don't."

"We're just going to stand out here waiting for him to come out?!" Ratchet stared between them.

"*No one* disturbs Megatron before the shift change." Thrust consulted his chrono, "Shouldn't be much longer."

Ratchet rolled back on his heels and grasped at the remains of his rapidly diminishing patience. The seekers shifted, then settled, and in the relative silence, Ratchet's audials focused on the underlying sounds of the Decepticon base. He could hear the creaks of the bulkheads groaning under the weight of the ocean above, the thrum of distant generators powering away, the odd echoing slam of a door shutting somewhere.

And a faint muffled noise, that sounded like someone's short panting breaths.

He dismissed it as his imagination, until he heard something much less inconspicuous. A hissed curse, Megatron's designation, a thunk suspiciously like the sound of a berth hitting the bulkhead - all floating out from behind the door of a room that was very obviously *not* sound proof.

The Coneheads shifted awkwardly.

"This is the worst thing I have *ever* had to endure," Ratchet announced tonelessly, as the noises within the room only seemed to grow louder.

"I don't know what you're taking about, I can't hear anything," Ramjet stubbornly tilted his helm back.

"Uh, yeah," Thrust agreed after a moments pause, far less convincingly. "I can't hear them having sex either."

Ramjet elbowed him sharply.

Ratchet, spurned on by the utter ridiculousness of the situation and a massive surge of childish spite he didn't know he even still possessed, slipped out of Ramjet's grasp and jabbed the door comm entry button anyway, just for the satisfaction of knowing the pleasant ping that would echo through the room would interrupt their morning romp.

Unfortunately, most door locks, unless they were actively locked, were programmed to open automatically upon requests for entry. Ratchet, a sane, responsible, *decent* mech, assumed, wrongly, that the two high ranking Decepticons on the other side of the door would have thought to *lock it*, at least for the duration of their frag.

Ratchet had sadly not considered that most Decepticons were too terrified of Megatron to even approach his private quarters, let alone dare to call upon him without prior invitation. He was probably the first mech in *years* to have pressed that entry button beside Megatron and Starscream themselves.

And for his ignorance, he earned himself an eyeful.

Ramjet and Thrust, wanting nothing to do with the situation unfolding before their very optics, fled like the cowards they were, leaving Ratchet stood foolishly in the doorway, blinking in acute horror at the scene in front of him.

A scene he would *never un-see*.

Ratchet Vs Sunstorm Part 1

Abandoned by the Coneheads -and Primus too, probably- Ratchet sat in the chair placed next to the door just inside Megatron's quarters, lingering emotionally in a place somewhere between blistering fury and boiling embarrassment. The combination meant he was sat glaring with a face redder than Starscream's cherry aft. Which he'd just gotten all too good a look at.

Megatron was sat glaring at him from the end of his dishevelled berth, likely feeling a similar cocktail of emotions. It was probably inadvisable to meet his gaze, but Ratchet did anyway, daring him to speak first.

The awkward tension in the room was only worsened by the rush of running solvent in the modestly sized wash-rack attached to Megatron's Command Quarters, where Starscream had escaped into after the ...interruption. The seeker was taking an excessively long shower, and Ratchet really didn't want to consider why.

Finally, Megatron spoke. "This had better be important."

"When it comes to the health of your mechs, nothing is more important," Ratchet sneered. He glanced towards the wash-rack. "It takes priority over everything, Including that damn seeker's valve."

Megatron stood abruptly, taking exception to his inappropriate mention of Starscream's ...favourable assets. Ratchet privately reprimanded himself for his own overactive vocaliser, but it was still hard to think of the two Decepticon high commanders as anything but enemies. Medic or not, he wasn't going to last long if he went about insulting the slagmaker's beau.

Even if he was easily the most insufferable Decepticon to have ever been built.

"You are on very thin ice," Megatron loomed menacingly. "Take care for how speak of your captors."

Take care of how you speak of my boyfriend, more like.

Ratchet was wise enough not to say that out loud.

"What did you come here for?" Megatron crossed his tree trunk thick arms over his chest.

Ratchet leaned back in the flimsy little seat he'd been ordered into, giving him a condescending once over. "For Starscream. Not you."

It wasn't what Megatron wanted to hear. Clearly he felt he was so important everything involved him.

"He's not gotten another virus, has he?" Megatron murmured in slightly sarcastic tone.

"You're not in any position to be making jokes like that now, are you?" Ratchet thrust a finger at him reproachfully. "I could *also* ask you where the protection I told you to use is? Because I didn't see any when you were-"

Megatron made a noise like a struck boar, sharp, wheezing, and utterly horrified. Ratchet don't finish the sentence for fear the fusion cannon would swing up and blast his head off. But now that he looked, Megatron wasn't even wearing his beloved weapon. A brave decision, considering who

was currently in his shower.

"Are you a medic or Optimus's fretful *grandmother*?!" Megatron thundered, but it was clear he was just embarrassed.

"Answer the damn question!" Ratchet found the idea of flustering Megatron too much fun to back down now. "Because if you were using something and you've gotten it lost inside-"

It was cruel, but it worked. Megatron span on his heel without a word and barged his way into the wash-rack just to escape him. Ratchet listened with satisfaction to the slam of the shower door and a following indignant screech from Starscream. The rush of solvent could only muffle some of their furious hisses, and Ratchet very clearly heard Megatron reprimand Starscream in a thoroughly disgusted tone for using the shower head inappropriately.

Which confirmed Ratchet's suspicions about what he'd been doing in there all this time.

He decided to distract himself by looking around the room while they continued to bicker in the wash-rack. From the high pitch of Starscream's voice, they would be in there for some time yet.

Megatron's quarters certainly put Ratchet's little room to shame but it was nowhere near as opulent as he had expected. Megatron was a selfish egomaniac, who took and took and left scraps for the rest. But there was no evidence of that mech within the four undecorated walls of this room. Too curious not to, Ratchet stood and began to snoop.

The berth, something he didn't want to venture too close to considering what crimes against decency had just been committed on it, was larger than standard size, but given that Megatron was a large mech (and shared it with Starscream?) that was to be expected. Above it was a shelf full of seemingly unimportant trinkets. A stone, a broken light-pen, a scribbled note on a crumpled piece of cardboard- in cursive handwriting he had come to recognise as Starscream's. There was an industrial sized tub of polish poking out from under the berth too. Ratchet knew who *that* belonged to.

The arguing in the wash-rack had gone quiet. Ratchet locked up in fear that they would start up again in there with what he had interrupted on the berth with his arrival. But after a pause, the door opened, and with a rush of billowing steam a clean dripping Starscream stepped out, a soft cloth tossed around his shoulders.

"You have traumatised Megatron," he announced, slipping the cloth from his shoulders and absently starting to dry his arms. "Good work."

"He was defending you a moment ago," Ratchet wasn't sure why he felt the need to point that out.

It didn't sway Starscream. "Well, naturally," he gestured to himself, broken cockpit roof and all. The duct-tape repairs weren't entirely waterproof. Ratchet could see some specks of solvent on the inside of the cracked glass.

Starscream swept past him to take a seat on the berth, and Ratchet then realised that the reason Starscream had shot out of the berth and into the safety of the wash-rack upon his entrance hadn't been embarrassment, as he seemed utterly unshaken in speaking to the mech who had just caught him in the middle of ...well.

"Finished yourself off with the shower head, I hear?" Ratchet quipped, just to see if he was as easy to make squirm as Megatron.

No such luck. Starscream grinned toothily. "Can't expect me to walk around frustrated all cycle,

I've a busy day ahead of me."

Ratchet forwent interrogating him over whether or not anyone was taking his advice about using contraception seriously and focused on what really mattered. Poor Dirge down in the barracks.

"Yes, a busy day pushing your airforce too hard, from what I understand."

Starscream's playfulness evaporated. "Excuse *you*?"

"Too little fuel and too much training." Ratchet approached the berth and pinged him in his duct-taped cockpit. "No wonder you're all so useless in the sky. Half those jets are one skipped ration from stasis-"

Starscream snorted. "*I* feel fine-"

"I don't care how *you* feel, you lazy, deflated-bagpipe of a seeker!" Ratchet pointed. "What about them?! Your mechs?! Do you even give a damn about them? I've always known you were rotten, but from what I've heard today about how you're treating your own *seekers*-"

"Heard from who?" Starscream's voice deepened dangerously.

Ratchet was grateful the cowardly Coneheads had fled from the corridor before Starscream had seen them.

"Doctor-patient confidentiality," he said smugly.

Starscream sneered, "I'm the finest commander any of those fools could ever hope for-"

"A 'good' commander fuels his mechs!"

"Then tell *him* that!" Starscream stood abruptly and flung an arm out towards the wash-racks where Megatron was hiding. "I'm not the one forcing them to live in squalor on an alien planet full of selfish insects that would happily see us starve to death. And *I'm* not the one valuing the lives of *those insects* over those of my fellow Cybertronians!" Starscream looked him up and down hatefully. "I push them because I want to win-"

"You're not going to win," Ratchet hissed. "Not here. Not on this planet. Not like this."

Starscream's lip curled. "We always win eventually, *Bot*."

"And at what cost? Half your faction starving? Your trine-"

A claw was suddenly inches from his nose. Starscream spoke, softly and dangerous, "Don't you dare try to tell me you give a flying scrap about my trine."

Ratchet wasn't going to admit that even if he did.

Satisfied with his silence, Starscream shifted back. Ratchet exhaled a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. Starscream ...could be surprisingly intimidating. Soundwave-levels of intimidating.

"Now then," Starscream clasped his hands together, smirking once more, as though nothing had ever happened. "Who's your unfortunate starving patient?"

Ratchet worked his glossa around his mouth, "I won't be party to you punishing someone for being unwell."

"If they are unwell, I won't."

"It's Dirge."

"How unsurprising," Starscream drawled.

"He's exhausted, Starscream," Ratchet growled.

"We'll see how exhausted he is when he see's me coming towards him," Starscream sneered. "One look at my face and he'll be up and in the flight hanger before you can shout 'nurse!'"

Ratchet rubbed both hands over his face in exhausted defeat.

The situation wasn't particularly ideal to start with, and Ratchet was rapidly running through scenarios where he might somehow be able to defend Dirge from Starscream's lug-headed ire, and then he and all the neglected jets might be able to convince upper command that this wasn't a one-jet problem but something that was affecting all the seekers. Possibly the entire faction.

Ratchet was also rather suspicious as to why Starscream wasn't showing the same exhausted side effects of long time malnourishment most of the other seekers were. Either the selfish bastard had pulled rank to secure himself a hoard of hidden fuel, or he was receiving special treatment from Megatron- which was odd, because Megatron himself had exhibited signs that he was also low on fuel.

The other most likely possibility, was that Starscream was a lazy piece of scrap and simply wasn't expending as much energy as the rest of his airforce, standing around on the ground shouting orders whilst his underlings ran themselves ragged to satisfy him.

Doctor or no, the more he thought about it, the stronger the temptation to punch Starscream in the face became.

Fortunately for Starscream and his very punchable face, an even more deserving target for his frustration was awaiting him back in the air-barracks.

Sunstorm.

"Hey!" Ratchet barked before Starscream could even get a word out, pointing at the radioactive monstrosity standing at the end of Dirge's berth, "Get away from him, you're toxic!"

"I think you'll find your blasphemous treatments the only 'toxic' thing here, Autobot," Sunstorm called with an air of infuriating superiority. He was holding a vial of blue oil, which he placed on the end of Dirge's berth. "Drink this."

Dirge, who had been hunched away from the glowing sun of a mech waited until Sunstorm took a step back before reaching for it.

"Don't just drink it!" Ratchet bellowed. "You don't even know what it is!"

"That is my *audial* you are screaming in," Starscream hissed dangerously, turning at the neck to glare at him.

"Now you know how everyone else feels," Ratchet muttered, shouldering past him to get a better look at Dirge. Unfortunately, Sunstorm had placed himself directly in the aisle between the rows of berths, and Ratchet couldn't reach his patient with exposing himself to dangerous levels of radiation he had no way of treating here.

"What the Pit have you given him, you hack!?"

Although he took after Starscream in every physical way, Sunstorm didn't have the same temper, and didn't rise to the name calling. Much to Ratchet's disappointment. "The blood of Primus."

Ratchet heard Starscream mutter something blasphemous behind him. Sunstorm appeared not to hear him, because he didn't spontaneously combust into righteous flame over the horror of it.

"*Energon* is the 'blood of Primus'," Ratchet hissed through gritted denta. "Which is what he needs. *That*, is colour dyed oil! **-I said don't drink it!**" He shrieked at Dirge who had brought the drink up to his lips.

"It's perfectly harmless, unlike anything you would give him," Sunstorm said coldly, hands clasped in front of his cockpit.

"Energon!" Ratchet yelled, feeling like he was talking to a golden brick wall. "I would give him energon!"

"Alright, enough!" Starscream interrupted, sounding like he was suffering from withdrawal after having gone so long without speaking. "There's nothing wrong with Dirge, Sunstorm. You're wasting your time-"

"Wasting *his* time?! You two really were caste from the same defected mould, weren't you?!" Ratchet snarled, pointing between the identical morons. "You are a lost cause-" he pointed at Sunstorm, "-but *you*," he whirled on Starscream, finger extended damningly, tone dripping with contempt. "I thought you had at least one fragging brain cell bouncing around up there, but it looks as if Megatron's fucked that out of you like you fucked out his sense of self preservation!"

Starscream looked too shocked to react. He stared. Sunstorm stared. Dirge was trying to sneak a sip.

"I SAID DON'T DRINK THAT!"

Dirge flinched so violently at his shout that the vial slipped from his digits and crashed to the floor.

That problem take came of, and reluctant to hang around long enough for Starscream to recover and rip him to shreds, Ratchet turned on his heel and barged his way out of the air-barracks, waking at speed to get back to the relative safety of his repair bay.

He was lucky enough to catch a snippet of the conversation between Sunstorm and Starscream as he left through, and it almost made it all worth it.

"I wasn't aware you and Lord Megatron were conjuxed, Commander Starscream?" Sunstorm said in a dangerous near-whisper.

"We aren't."

"Well, we can't have that now, can we."

If Ratchet got to witness a Decepticon shotgun ceremony orchestrated by Sunstorm before his inevitable rescue, he would die a happy mech.

Air Force Enemy Number One

Ratchet hadn't thought his Decepticon hosts could possibly get any more dysfunctional, but three full cycles after the start of Soundwave's medical sabbatical, the chaos reached a new level of buffoonery.

Having done his best to avoid delusional seekers -made easier by the fact that they too were avoiding him- he found himself spending most of his time patching up the brawlers and troublemakers of the faction. There was always *some* violence occurring within the halls of the sunken base, but without Soundwave's vigilance and tenacity, it was now constant. Ratchet couldn't exist anywhere within the halls without the crunches and clangs of colliding armour, and bellows and shouts and curses and hisses, chasing him.

It had become a blessing in disguise, his clash with the air force, as the sudden surplus in Con on Con violence had naturally resulted in a sudden surplus of patients. There was now a line of dishevelled, bleeding, dented mechs outside his repair bay waiting to be seen. He wasn't alone at first, as Breakdown seemed more than willing to be bossed around by an Autobot and turned out to be a more than fair assistant.

That was until *he* got into a brawl with Motormaster, apparently over who had called dibs on a certain bunk. Ratchet was surprised that two mechs who he had been led to believe had cared about one another could do such a thing over something so pointless. He sent Breakdown to the back of the line when he reached the front, out of spite brought on by his disappointment. Breakdown ducked his helm and did as he was told.

To make matters worse, cramming all the Decepticon's most notorious troublemakers into one place where they were already cranky and aching and impatient wasn't working out. Fights broke out in the line. Vortex stumbled in with one chopper blade caught in Astrotrain's hip armour and he other jammed into part of Mixmaster's cement mixer, making the three of them stuck together.

It made Ratchet's entire existence rather counterproductive. He would consider asking someone about establishing some sort of waiting room where he could keep his patients relatively separate, but who to go to? Soundwave was on Cybertron, Starscream had declared him air force enemy number one, and Megatron was...

Simply put, Ratchet wasn't asking *him* for anything.

He allowed himself a five minute break between patients, thinking about all this and wondering how he had managed to make such a mess of his life since becoming qualified as a medic. He had had such big aspirations as a young mech; of making a difference, educating the forgotten, helping those who needed it most...

How had he wound up here, pulling double shifts to knock dents out of ungrateful, violent Cons?

He steadied himself for his next patient. The conviction he had summoned dwindled rather rapidly when Swindle stepped through his doors, missing *both* arms, but not looking particularly bothered about it.

He flashed Ratchet a smile. "Gimme a hand?"

"I'd love to," Ratchet said unconvincingly. "But I'm rather lacking in spare parts." He glanced at the joints of Swindle's shoulders, relieved to see they were relatively intact. It didn't look like

someone had ripped them off, but like they had been removed and ...misplaced?

Ratchet went straight in with the obvious question. "Where are your arms?"

"Not here."

"I can see that!" Ratchet wagged a finger at him. "Come back with the rest of yourself."

"And how do you expect me to do that?" Swindle exclaimed, the ball joint in his arm socket moved up and down like he would have been throwing his arms up helplessly. "Carry them in my mouth?"

"It's certainly big enough."

"Look, I'll level with you," Swindle swaggered over to him and leaned into his personal space. "I had a little misunderstanding with Bonecrusher. Let's call it a business mishap. He seemed to think I owed him something-"

"Your *arms*?"

"I wasn't gonna dip into my merchandise stockpile now was I?" Swindle seemed to think this was all very funny. "Perhaps you could have a word with the big guy? He owes you, doesn't he?"

Ratchet had last seen Bonecrusher when he'd been forced to douse him with a firehose, so he wasn't entirely sure the Constructicon would think he was in Ratchet's debt. "What did you do?"

"What?"

"To Bonecrusher," Ratchet glared. "I know he's a violent thug but he doesn't just go around stealing arms for the hell of it, or *none* of you'd have any limbs. So what did you do? Steal something from him?"

"I don't steal," Swindle huffed, a blatant lie if Ratchet had ever heard one. "He just wasn't satisfied with my product."

Ratchet had a bad feeling, "*What* product?"

"Some junk miracle medicine Sunstorm's been flogging," Swindle shrugged.

"You gave him fake medicine?!" Ratchet's face heated up as his worst fears were confirmed.

"Ha," Swindle laughed. "Of course not, there's no profit to be made out of that. Nah, I told him it was a drug."

Ratchet would have dropped his face into his hands in despair had he been capable of tearing his glare away from Swindle's idiotic little face. "What. Did. It. *Do*."

"That's the problem," Swindle's socket joints began to wriggle again. "Nothing!"

Ratchet rubbed his temples. That was one small mercy. Sunstorm's ridiculous concoctions weren't of any use, but at least they weren't doing any harm either. So far.

Either way, Swindle's story didn't make him feel anymore sympathetic. "Alright, get out."

"But you-"

"I can't do anything without your arms so pull yourself together, be a mech, and apologise to Bonecrusher for being such a greasy little-" he paused, gaze hardening, "-swindler," he finished.

Swindle didn't think much to his advice. "Oh yeah, that'll work."

"If he still doesn't give you the arms back tell it I'll be reporting to Megatron the results of his last medical checkup, wherein suspicious substances were found in his fuel-lines."

Swindle brightened and nodded in thanks, "See in you a flash, Doc!"

Ratchet wanted to bang his helm against the bulkhead.

"Next!" He called through the open door.

It wasn't all bad, he reminded himself that evening. *They* weren't all bad.

And not every seeker hated him.

Skywarp teleported into the centre of his repair bay, an arm slung around Thundercracker's shoulder, and without explanation, shoved his hand into his cockpit and brought it back out with a fistful of random, dirty, loose parts.

Ratchet stared down at the collection of junk that had just been dumped in his cupped hands, wondering what the appropriate response was to such behaviour. He met Skywarp's optics. Skywarp grinned wider.

"We found them," Skywarp explained, letting his arm slip away from Thundercracker and then, with such shocking familiarity that even Ratchet recoiled, slid it into Thundercracker's cockpit and scooped up a handful of yet more junk from him.

"We flew over a junkyard," Thundercracker explained, unnaturally calm as he stood and let Skywarp root around inside his cockpit. Primus, they really were close. "Thought we'd pick up a few things, in case you needed them."

"Mostly car parts though," Skywarp lamented, picking up a piece of metal that looked like a door hinge before dropping it into Ratchet's growing pile. "I guess our stuff is too upmarket to be found in a junk yard, huh. No one abandons fighter jets on the side of the road."

"This is-" Ratchet hesitated. Would it be unfair to shout at them when they were only trying to help? But was he going to blow a gasket if he held it in? "You *shouldn't have*," he settled on saying in a deeply tense voice.

The seekers fortunately -or unfortunately, he wasn't sure yet- did not pick up on the sarcasm.

"And we wanted to say hi," Skywarp added.

"We saw you made yourself pretty popular with air force," Thundercracker smiled softly, optics dimming with sympathy.

Unable to stand pity from a *Decepticon*, and frankly uncaring that a bunch of immature, oblivious metal-pigeons didn't like him very much at the moment, Ratchet turned away and dumped all his

...gifts onto a tool tray. "Their loss."

"I can't believe you had the ball bearings to tell Sunstorm about Starscream's sexual 'depravity'." Skywarp began, sounding excited. "You know what he thinks of mecha who 'face outside of conjunxual commitments? *And* outside their own frame-type?" Skywarp laughed, slapping his own thigh. "I've wanted to spill those cosmic beans for centuries, I just never dared-"

Ratchet was about to make some wry comment about not being surprised to hear Sunstorm was a bit racist too, before catching on to what else Skywarp had said.

"Centuries...?" He muttered, feeling an odd sort of clenching sensation in his chest.

Skywarp hadn't heard him, still prattling away to himself. "-getting pretty weird about it now though."

"What?" Ratchet zoned back in.

"The Sunstorm-Starscream thing," Thundercracker clarified. "Keeps saying he's going to use the infinite healing hand of Primus to restore Starscream's sinful spark." He rolled his optics.

Ratchet had never heard such nonsense in all his life. "There's nothing wrong with Starscream's spark. Medically."

(Because he *was* an evil, twisted little-)

"Well I wouldn't want his 'healing hands' on me," Skywarp scrunched his olfactory up. "I'm just glad he doesn't know about us." He gestured between himself and Thundercracker.

"What the pit is this healing hand thing anyway?" Ratchet couldn't help his curiosity. "More colour dye?"

"He thinks he was sent down by Primus to save us all from ourselves," Thundercracker explained.

Skywarp frowned, "I thought he thought he *was* Primus."

"I think he does some days," Thundercracker shrugged. "Anyway, he thinks the radiation he emits is a gift from the creator himself and that it has healing properties-"

"Radiation?!" Ratchet couldn't conceal his horror. "If he touched someone they'd-!"

"Fragging *melt*, yeah," Skywarp nodded with wide optics, sounding excited. "Which is why we keep the Pit away from him-"

"So you're telling me he's out to murder your own trine-leader because Starscream dared to mix his coding with someone Sunstorm doesn't approve of and you're just *standing around gossiping about it?!"*

Skywarp and Thundercracker looked at each other. "Well, yeah-"

"Relax, Ratch'," Skywarp patted him on the arm. Ratchet stared at the offending hand, thinking if he came near him again he would slice it off. "Don't waste valuable emotional energy worrying over Screamer-"

"Besides," Thundecracker chimed in. "Starscream says he's got it under control."

"And if he doesn't?" Skywarp lifted his arms up. "Screamer's pretty cockroach-y. It'd probably take

a lot of 'Primus's healing' to really do the job."

"Do either of you have any idea how excruciating radiation poisoning is?" Ratchet hissed through teeth so tightly clenched they felt like they were going to crack.

"Worse than having to listen to Screamer all day?"

"Get out," he ordered. "Get out of my repair bay, go and find Starscream, and keep him away from Sunstorm-"

Skywarp's mouth dropped open. "But it's *date night*!"

"I didn't care what night it is. I'm not having that maniac melt Starscream into a pile of goo on my watch, now go!"

"Jeez," Skywarp muttered, glaring at him as he slung his arm around Thundercracker's shoulders again. "It's almost like you care about him or something."

He teleported away with a crack, leaving Ratchet stood in his now empty, junk filled repair bay.

"I don't," he told the empty room lamely. "I don't care about Starscream."

He didn't care about any of them -though it was growing harder and harder to keep telling himself that.

No reports had come through about a melted Air Commander over night so Ratchet breathed a little easier the next cycle. The novelty of a Soundwave-free base had also seemed to wear off a little, and there was a noticeable decrease in fights and injuries.

In fact, Ratchet's first patient was sporting an injury caused by a very different sort of recreational activity.

And even more surprising, it was a pair of Shockwave's seekers.

Slipstream sat on his examination berth with the most thunderous scowl Ratchet had ever seen on a seeker. Beside her, a contrast to the threatening aura of palpable *hate* Slipstream was giving off, Nova Storm was shifting from pede to pede in nervous agitation. Ratchet didn't doubt that she was the only reason Slipstream herself was trusting him to work on her.

It'd be best if he tread lightly. Slipstream was a cold, calculating sociopath. Or, so the rumours said.

Ratchet cleared his vocaliser, "Your tongue?" He clarified.

Slipstream nodded once. Nova Storm wrung her fingers together.

"It got ...caught," she explained for the stoic seeker.

Ratchet's gaze tracked to her, "Caught in what?"

Slipstream did not answer -forgivable, her tongue had been allegedly torn- but Nova Storm's yellow armour turned orange in embarrassment. "Erm, we were. She- you see I-"

Rolling her optics at Nova Storm's stuttering, Slipstream lifted two fingers to her mouth and flicked her damaged tongue between them, a gesture often used to indicate cunnilingus. If possible, Nova Storm blushed harder.

"I see," Ratchet nodded in understanding. "Those callipers can be tricky devils."

Slipstream nodded in agreement. Nova Storm made a mournful noise.

"And what about you?" Ratchet turned his gaze on her. He enjoyed teasing these Cons a little too much sometimes. "Nothing's been pulled out of alignment, I'm assuming?"

Nova Storm shook her head quickly, clearly mortified.

Ratchet turned back to Slipstream and touched her jaw, tilting her head back. "Open."

She did, extending the damaged appendage. It's misshapen appearance didn't mean she couldn't speak, but it meant her words were likely to be lisped or gargled. For someone with Slipstream's ego, it was preferable simply not to speak at all.

And she wouldn't be speaking for some time.

"It's conforming back to it's regular shape," Ratchet studied it, "but I'm afraid I don't have anything here to speed up the process."

Slipstream, showing startlingly maturity for a seeker, simply nodded in understanding.

"You're lucky," Ratchet continued. "It shouldn't have any lasting effects. It'll be back in action before you know it."

The 'action' he had been referring to was *speaking*, but Slipstream turned her head and winked devilishly at Nova Storm. The poor yellow seeker looked as if she would collapse across his repair bay floor if she was tormented any further.

Slipstream slipped off the berth and Nova Storm managed a small thanks at Ratchet when she rushed to follow.

"And keep away from Sunstorm!" He called after them.

Halfway down the corridor Slipstream turned to walk backwards and fired a finger-gun of acknowledgment his way.

At least *someone* was taking his advice seriously.

No Bananas Big Enough

It was just the next day when yet another interface-related mishap appeared in Ratchet's repair bay. Blast Off stood in the entrance, his legs crossed at the ankles, exuding mortification, his visor dimmed pathetically. He squirmed, and after a lengthy interrogation made complaints of an unpleasant ache. Down *there*.

Amused by Blast Off's complete inability to explain his condition with a single ounce of maturity, Ratchet leaned against the bulkhead and waited with his best poker face to hear how it had happened. Only for Blast Off to reveal he didn't *know* what had happened. Which was an even greater worry than his actual symptoms, given the nature of the affected parts.

One look under his panels, at his malfunctioning intimate array, told Ratchet exactly what was wrong.

"It's minor bug," he sighed.

"How can you tell?" Blast Off's voice drifted over from the other end of the berth he was laying prone across.

Ratchet raised a brow. The purple bio-lights of Blast Off's spike and valve were flashing and pulsing at a rapid seizure-inducing pace like he planned to host a rave down there. Ratchet hooked his thumbs into his hip plating and nodded towards the light-show.

"Oh." Blast Off pressed his thighs together, his visor brightening to the same purple as his array. "I thought that was ...normal."

Ratchet felt a migraine coming on. He stowed the urge to bombard him with ridicule. "*Why?*"

A little shrug. And a mumble.

"You'll have to speak up."

"Onslaught-" Blast Off hesitated and stopped. "It started when I- we," he made a weird gesture that Ratchet couldn't possibly hope to decipher. "-and now it won't stop."

Ratchet had to assume he was talking about the horizontal-tango.

"Onslaught's spike is like this too?" He asked for clarity, just to know for sure where this little idiot had been gifted such a delightful bug.

Blast Off nodded sharply.

"He's where you picked it up from then. You'll need to tell him to come and see me, and to bring a list of whoever else he's been with."

Blast Off looked miserable.

"It's fine," Ratchet patted his shoulder, "It's just a little blip. I can fix it."

Blast Off didn't cheer up, "Is this gonna happen every time I interface?"

Ah, that explained the blush that had illuminated Blast Off for the entirety of their conversation.

"Not every time," Ratchet reassured him, keeping his tone as casual as he could manage. "Only if you're going to go around doing it without taking precautions."

Blast Off's blank stare reminded Ratchet that he now resided in an entire base full of mecha that had little to no education in these matters. Having already given one shouty lecture about contraceptives to Megatron, and unwilling for it to become a weekly occurrence with each and every single Decepticon he came across, Ratchet had to accept that he was going to have to actively spread the word

Or he was going to leave this place with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the entire Decepticon faction's private nooks and crannies and what they liked to do with them.

The real problem, he realised, when he'd finally come to the end of the long slog of sifting through the mess of a repair-bay, was that the Decepticons had no contraceptives to begin with. Not even a measly, old fashioned spike-cap.

Ratchet himself had a few single-use transnanite signal blockers in his subspace -the only thing his kidnappers hadn't confiscated from him upon his capture- but he had already regretfully flung those at Megatron the evening he had spent removing that virus from his fuel lines. Infuriatingly, the old mech didn't appear to be bothering to use them anyway.

He avoided Megatron whenever he could and he wasn't about to seek him out just to ask for a measly handful of TSB's that wouldn't be enough to last this faction five minutes anyway. Unfortunately, finding an agreeable Con to put in a request that they be bridged over from the stockpiles he knew still existed on Cybertron was now impossible without Soundwave's presence to assist in the ridiculous message chain needed to get them.

He *wouldn't* ask Megatron. He *couldn't* ask Starscream -because he had cheerfully heard from Skywarp that the Air Commander still had plans to shoot him in the kneecaps if he dared to speak to him ever again- which meant he was going to have to summon his well out-of-practice improvisation skills and figure out how to secure some himself. While in captivity. On an enemy base.

There were plenty on the *Ark*. He never would have let the Autobots leave Cybertron without an overstocked repair bay and means of procuring more. A shame he couldn't just sneak back over and borrow a few...

He rolled his optics as he reminded himself that *if* he could escape this hell hole he would have by now. And he certainly wouldn't be making any return trips to drop off some TSB's and sets of baffles.

He put the idea out of his mind for now, privately weighing up the pros and cons of going against everything he had ever believed in by lecturing his at-risk patients about the 'joys of abstinence' in lieu of being able to provide anything to better protect them (though when he thought about it, he was sure Sunstorm was already doing that for him).

Working on non-interface related injuries helped to take his mind off those worries though, and Ravage provided him with that perfect distraction when he came limping into the repair bay with one front paw held aloft.

He leapt up onto the berth without issue, and much like Starscream had some days before, stuck his paw out for inspection and tossed his helm back with an air of exaggerated importance.

Ratchet grabbed it and turned it over. There was a sharp jagged piece of metal sticking out of the softer sensory padding of his paw. A fairly simple fix. He picked up a pair of old pliers and yanked it out. Ravage hissed, his steel claws shooting out of their sheaves, coming dangerously close to sinking into Ratchet's hand.

"Don't be a pussy," Ratchet muttered, dropping the jagged piece to the side.

Ravage's lip curled to show off a row of dangerously sharp teeth.

"It means cat!" Ratchet argued, forgetting that Ravage, having spent so much time spying on humans and sneaking in and out of places he shouldn't be, would be familiar with a lot of Earth slang. He smoothed his thumb over the wound, mindful of the claws, and waited for the energon to stop seeping. Self repair-nanites on such delicate places were quick working, and it was more hassle than it was worth to weld it. Not to mention an added unnecessary layer of pain.

"There," he finished. "Now try not to go slinking through any junkyards for a while."

Ravage glared and nodded sharply, dropping from the berth. He kept some of the weight off his front paw, but it wasn't so painful he couldn't stand on it now. Which was fortunate, because he seemed in a rush to get somewhere. Ratchet wondered what he could be doing with Soundwave away and unable to boss him around. Spying on the Autobots, probably.

An idea sparked into being before his very optics.

"Wait!" He called.

Ravage stopped, flashing him a disinterested look over his shoulder.

Ratchet could hardly believe he was about to ask this. "Do you think you could break into and remove something from the *Ark* without detection?"

Ravage blinked slowly, the curves of his mouth lifting smugly. *I don't think it'll be too much trouble.*

The guilt of having sent an enemy soldier -a *spy* no less- with instructions on how to evade capture into his own faction's base, was soon outweighed by the results.

Without Soundwave to monitor his comings and goings Ravage hadn't felt the need to inform any of his superiors about his little trip, which Ratchet was thankful for. He had no doubt Megatron and Starscream -relentless bastards they were- would have jumped on the bandwagon with all sorts of demands for what havoc Ravage should wreak on his way. It was unlikely they would have approved an infiltration mission of which the one and only purpose was to steal baffles.

"You weren't seen?" He checked, sickened at the thought of First Aid or Wheeljack wandering into the medbay only to come face to snarling-maw with Ravage. "You didn't hurt anyone-?"

Do I look like an amateur?

"You look like an omen," Ratchet muttered.

I expect compensation for this favour, Ravage told him, sat in the centre of his pilfered loot, his tail

flicking back and forth. He was oozing a sense of superiority that might have even eclipsed Starscream's.

"I'm only here for your benefit, aren't I?" Ratchet reminded him hotly, shooing him with a hand wave. "Now get out of here, unless you want me to give you a demonstration on how this stuff works?"

Ravage bowed his head made an awful gagging noise like he was about to cough up a hair ball like the organic felines he took his image from. He fled the repair bay, nothing but a swish of long black tail and the scurry of claws skidding on the decking. Ratchet nodded in satisfaction.

All that was left to do now was to get Decepticons to actually use this stuff.

Ratchet had given demonstrations of this nature before. The most horrifying of which to the relatively newly online Dinobots, at Optimus's uncharacteristically awkward request. And Ratchet did not want to know the circumstances behind why such a thing had needed Primely intervention.

The Dinobot's naivety on the matter was nothing Ratchet had hadn't tackled before -the level of ignorance from some of the uneducated labourers he'd treated on Cybertron was *criminal* - but the inquisitiveness of the young human allies an irresponsible Bumblebee had led into the room Ratchet had setting up for the workshop had thrown even him.

"Bumblebee!" He remembered snarling, throwing himself in front of the table, covering the equipment from innocent organic eyes. "They're too young to be in here!"

"We're teenagers," Spike argued, which had been *exactly* Ratchet's point.

"We had a class like this once," Carly had explained, always the most mature of the humans Ratchet knew. And that was including Sparkplug.

She pointed behind Ratchet, a smile pulling at her lips, "I guess the bananas on this planet aren't really big enough for you guys to use in demonstrations, huh?"

Ratchet stepped sideways, not needing to look to see which item had caught her eye. "Bumblebee."

"Got it Ratch', let's go guys!" Bumblebee said in a quick rush, ushering them out again.

One small upside to this situation was that Ratchet didn't have to worry about any interruptions from smart-aleck teenage humans who had been to *one* sex-ed class in their oblivious little lives and seemed to think they knew everything, but then found the sight of anything remotely phallic-shaped the height of comedy.

But then, looking at some of the seekers, Ratchet couldn't be too confident that this would be taken seriously.

He had sent Skywarp out to spread the invitation, then immediately regretted doing such a stupid thing because *that* seeker could barely be trusted to perform the simplest of the duties, even by those who had the most misplaced faith in him. So he recruited Thundercracker as well, sure that between Skywarp's blunt, crude nature and Thundercracker's crippling sense of propriety, there was a balance, and that some semblance of an audience might be persuaded enough to inflict this upon themselves.

Since the repair bay was so spacious (void of the equipment and supplies it should have had) Ratchet had plenty of room to set up impromptu seating out of the large crates the Decepticons used to store their medical records. He placed six crates in a semi circle around the med-berth he was using as a display table, and stepped back with a satisfied nod.

Six would be a good turn out.

He had vastly underestimated the Venn diagram of the Decepticons that both *needed* this workshop and would be willing to sit through it, because *eighteen* of them turned up.

Ratchet blinked at his squashed audience, too surprised at the amount of them out to even yell at Motormaster for shoving Scavenger off a crate to steal his seat.

"This enough?" Skywarp popped into existence next to him with a little crack and fizz.

Growing used to his sudden appearances (Primus help him) Ratchet didn't flinch.

"Yes," Ratchet said tonelessly, optics roaming across them, taking in their faces. Most of which he had come to know, some he which he barely recognised. "What did you tell them this was?!"

Skywarp appeared surprised that he would think he had needed to sugarcoat the workshop to get mecha to come. "That you were going to teach them how to 'face better.'"

"No I'm-" Ratchet sighed in exasperation. "This is a demonstration of various equipment designed to make interfacing a healthier, safer, and more comfortable experience."

Skywarp smiled. "Yeah, better 'facing!'"

Ratchet shoved his shoulder, "I'm sick of looking at you. You've done your job, you can go."

"No way!" Skywarp slipped around him and situated himself among the Decepticon audience. "I put in all the work getting everyone here, I at least get to watch."

Ratchet opened his mouth to argue, then realised with how often Skywarp insinuated he and Thundercracker were intimate, it was probably best he stay after all. It wasn't just viral transmissions these Decepticons needed to worry about.

And now that he thought about it, "Where's Thundercracker? He should be here too."

Skywarp shifted, giving Ratchet a Look to remind him that he and Thundercracker weren't exactly open about their relationship to the faction at large. "Don't worry about him, I'll pass this on-"

"With plenty of omissions and inaccuracies, I'm sure," Ratchet hooked his thumbs into his hip plating and leant back. "I would rather he heard it first hand-"

"He's busy," Ramjet jumped in, glancing at Skywarp suspiciously, "Keeping Sunstorm distracted. Unless you want him gliding in here and turning this into a debate on morality?"

Ratchet's teeth ground together, "Alright, Thundercracker can be excused on the basis that he's taking one for the team and we're all very grateful for his sacrifice."

Several Decepticons murmured in agreement.

Ratchet stepped to the side so everyone had an uninterrupted view of the repair berth, set up all the varying chemicals, hardware, and equipment used in the practice of responsible interfacing.

"This," he picked up the thumb-sized, needleless syringe full of purple gel and held it up for everyone to see, "Is single-use transnanite signal blocker. Any one know how to use it?"

Eighteen identically clueless faces stared at him.

Ratchet smiled to himself. This was going to be a *long* session.

Ratchet made sure to hand out everything as fairly as he could, finding dregs of patience he hadn't realised he still had when a few Decepticons subtly asked to stop by again later, in private. Ratchet mentally prepared himself for the yet more embarrassing mishaps.

Skywarp, to his relief (and oddly enough, pride) grabbed a massive handful of TSBs and crammed them into his subspace.

"You and-" Ratchet stopped himself from saying Thundercracker, glancing behind as Slipstream wandered past, her clever optics narrowed in suspicion. "*You* would probably benefit from a longer lasting contraceptive," he advised Skywarp. "Like baffles."

Skywarp shrugged. "Yeah, but you said they need replacing every hundred years or so. And who's gonna do that when you're gone?"

Ratchet didn't know what to say to that. He pushed the tray containing the TSBs closer. "Take some for your trine-mates."

Skywarp took a couple more, but not for Starscream apparently, because- "Screamer won't want any."

Ratchet rolled his optics. "Don't tell me Sunstorm's gotten to him?"

Skywarp laughed, a horribly undignified sort of snorting cackle. "Nah, he just doesn't use them."

Ratchet had thought his opinion of Starscream was so low it couldn't have possibly sunk any lower. He was wrong, because down it was going. "Do I need to plan another workshop?" He asked dangerously, "a *mandatory* one this time?"

"Screamer studied science for like, five hundred thousand years in Iacon," Skywarp pulled a regretful face. "He knows this stuff already."

The room felt darker as a thundercloud began to descend over Ratchet's vision. Starscream was not an idiot, as much as he liked to think otherwise. He knew exactly what sort of things could occur to a mech this careless.

"Where is he?" Ratchet demanded.

"He's in his lab," Skywarp looked a little intimidated, shrinking away from him. "Why?"

"Take me to him." Ratchet slapped a hand to Skywarp's shoulder. "Now."

Starscream had better have an *amazing* excuse for being so averse to common sense. Either he was hiding something, or planning something. And just because the petty Air Commander was giving him the silent treatment didn't mean Ratchet wasn't going to find out what it was.

No One Here Is Wearing Pants!

Ratchet had Skywarp teleport him outside Starscream's quarters-turned-laboratory just so he could give the access panel solid punch (again, unlocked) and thunder through the doorway like a storm of righteous rage.

"*Starscream!*" He barked.

Jumping like a juvenile caught with their hand in the energon-goodie jar, Starscream's head snapped up from the chemicals he had been mixing. He was wearing a ridiculous pair of gold rimmed goggles over his optics, which magnified the already widened red orbs to three times their size through the glass.

Unsurprisingly, he had company. Megatron was sat in a chair resting against the opposite wall, almost as far from the ongoing experiment as he could get - like Starscream didn't trust him anywhere near the chemicals. Something about his position implied he had been recharging, or at least dozing before Ratchet had entered the room shouting. He was still in the chair now, looking around around the lab like he couldn't remember where he was or how he'd gotten there.

Never minding Megatron having his senior-moment, Starscream's nose wrinkled in distaste. He looked like an angry bug.

"Who give you permission to entire my private quarters?!" He screeched, slapping his hands to the workstation and standing with a scrape of his stool. "I should have you-!"

Ratchet had no interest in learning what Starscream planned to have *someone else do to him*. He flung out a hand and thrust a condemning finger at the seeker's stupid goggles. "Oh, you'll protect your *optics* from chemicals but you won't protect your valve from *his unwrapped spike*?!"

There was another chair scrape when Megatron stood quickly, finally awake enough to recognise what situation he as in, and that it deserved his offence.

"*Medic*," he began in a low, dangerous rasp, helm bowed and optics cast in shadow.

Ratchet had no interest in listening to him either. His hand cut through the air fast enough to create a whistle of air.

"No. I'm not talking to *you*, bucket-brains," he snarled, with force enough to straighten Megatron's back. "I know *exactly* who wears the pants in this trash-fire of a relationship and it sure as Pit isn't you! So sit down and shut that ugly hole in your face before I come over there and *staple* it!"

"*Pants*?! No one here is wearing pants!" Starscream shrilled, still wearing those stupid goggles. "Have you lost your mind?!"

"Have you?!" Ratchet roared, "What's so difficult about using those TSBs I gave you?! Are you trying to get sick on purpose?! Is that why you won't let me fix that cockpit? Are you after a *fragging vacation to Cybertron*?!"

Starscream clumsily shoved the goggles up his forehead to maximise the strength of his glare, "Chose your next words carefully," he hissed quietly, a slightly deranged twitch to his left optic.

"They may very well be your last."

He sounded serious. *Megatron* must have thought he sounded serious too because he was suddenly crossing the room to stand between them, back, wisely, to Ratchet. He may be an enemy Autobot, but Starscream had a history of literal backstabbing.

"We need the medic," Megatron reminded him tensely.

"We need the medic's *hands*," Starscream hissed nastily, head ducked and crazed red optics peering at Ratchet through the gap between Megatron's arm and side. There was a ring of sharp metal as Starscream picked up a lab knife. "Hold him down, Megatron. I can graft them into Hook before the day is out and then we'll have all the skill and none of the *mouth*."

Utterly unafraid by the threats of a immature, selfish *clown*, Ratchet stuck his head around Megatron. "Oh I'd like to see you fragging try, you glammed up tramp."

There was a thunderous smash of glass and plastic as Starscream swept a hand across his workstation and sent his experiments crashing to the floor. He climbed up onto it, pathetic three-inch lab-knife extended in front of him. His frame tensed like he intended to use the workstation as a platform in which to *launch* himself clean over Megatron and tackle Ratchet.

Megatron grabbed him before he could, and there was a thoroughly enjoyable five minutes where Ratchet had the pleasure of watching the near dilapidated warlord struggle to hold his squirming, writhing second, all while dodging the mad swing of the lab-knife. Seeker's having so many additional joints made Starscream exceptionally flexible, so Ratchet had to hand it to Megatron; he did a commendable job keeping hold of the liquid-like jet.

A twist of a blue wrist and the knife clattered to the floor. They were both out of breath and flushed by the time Megatron had Starscream under control -or rather, Starscream's rage had receded enough for him to suspend his attack. For now.

He was still glaring at Ratchet hatefully, his back flushed to Megatron's chest, the toes of his pedes just brushing the floor as he hung from his leader's large right arm like a dangled cat. His goggles, miraculously, had managed to stay on his head, but were now comedically askew.

Ratchet was well aware that it would be all too easy to reignite the passionate rage simmering at Starscream's core. And that the results would have continued to be endlessly entertaining.

But *someone* had to be an adult. And he couldn't let Megatron surpass him as the calmest mech in the room.

"You're going to tell me everything," Ratchet said quietly, swinging his finger between both panting Decepticons. "Everything about this sly little game you've been playing, and what the hell you think it could possibly achieve."

"You have no right to demand anything of us," Megatron's arm noticeably tightened around Starscream when the seeker wriggled angrily. "You're a prisoner, who is trading medical care for preferential treatment."

Ratchet's optics nearly bulged out of their sockets. "Preferential treatment?!" He exclaimed. "Is *that* what you call half rations and rust-covered living quarters?!"

Megatron didn't answer - so Starscream did. "You're consuming the same as what every Decepticon receives," he sneered. "Which is far more than you deserve. Be grateful you weren't left to *starve*."

"Remind me to send you a 'thank you' when I'm back on the Ark," Ratchet lifted his hands, palms outwards, "Would have been pretty hard for me to remove that virus of yours were I dead in a cell though, don't you think?"

Starscream shoved at the arm Megatron had around him. "Let go of me, I'm not going to kill him."

Ratchet was sure there was an unspoken 'yet' in there.

Megatron reluctantly released him, taking a step back and to the side. His foot -Ratchet didn't fail to notice- casually stepped on the lab knife and dragged it out of Starscream's reach.

"You really think we would willingly share *our* secrets with you?" Starscream asked him coldly. "An Autobot? Pretending to give a slag about a bunch of criminals and terrorists? You think I would trust *you* with the complexities of my life just because you've gotten all cosy with my idiotic trine? I know you think you've managed to squirm your way into position of value here, that you've become something of a confidant to some of these pinheads - but you haven't fooled me."

Starscream was slowly advancing on him, and he was close enough now that Ratchet could see all the complex lenses and components of his optics - their almond shape, a design feature unique to Vos builds. With his glare the red light was condensed down to a fine crimson line. *Bright* crimson. Brighter than anyone else's optics here. Fully powered. Fully fuelled.

"Where are you getting the extra fuel?" Ratchet confronted him.

Starscream's narrow glare flashed into a wide optic'd stare with a blink of surprise. His hesitation lasted for all of half a second, but it was long enough. "I don't know what-?"

Ratchet snapped his gaze to Megatron. Ratchet hadn't missed the surprise plastered across his far less guarded expression. "Are you giving it to him?"

Megatron's jaw tensed. His optics flicked to Starscream-

"That's a 'yes' then," Ratchet deduced before the mech even had a chance to speak, fixing his stare back on Starscream. "So why is that?"

Starscream's lips pressed into a hard thin line, his olfactory wrinkled angrily. To his credit, he didn't look away from Ratchet's stare when he boldly lied - "He trades it for sexual favours." He tossed his helm back, wings floating up, unashamed. "What can I say, I guess I have him wrapped around my little finger."

Megatron's emitted an abortive coughing noise that might have started life in his vocaliser as Starscream's name indignantly wheezed. Ratchet wasn't going to let them distract him from the real clues though.

If Starscream could trade sexual favours for supplies he wouldn't have stopped at just a extra few rations of energon. The mech didn't know when to quit. If Megatron was really so susceptible to his wants, the seeker would be on the throne by now.

There a was simpler explanation.

"Are you sparked?" he guessed.

Megatron made that noise again.

Starscream's optics flared even brighter, his poker face finally shattering.

"Of course I'm fragging not!" He screeched, "You *know* I'm not! You rooted through my entire system when you removed that virus! I've never heard such *baseless*-!"

"Alright, shut up! You're not sparked!" Ratchet yelled over his tantrum, retreating away from Starscream's wildly gesticulating hands in case one of them flew up and smacked him across the face. "But you're trying, aren't you?"

Starscream shuttered his optics, collected himself, and when he reopened them, stared at Ratchet with what could have been the best pokerface Ratchet had ever seen from him. It was a blank slate, utterly void of any feeling. No anger. No fear. No embarrassment. Nothing.

If *that* hadn't been enough to give the game away Megatron's decidedly *unpoker*-like face told Ratchet everything he needed to know.

Just to torment the larger mech, Ratchet met his gaze and stared him down, watching the twitch of his olfactory as he struggled to keep his frown in place. Starscream turned slowly to glance at Megatron too, shooting him a warning look.

It didn't help.

Megatron's expression collapsed with a curse. He quickly looked away.

"This is ridiculous," Starscream stepped sideways to block Megatron from view. "Why would I- we- no one would be stupid enough to- we *haven't even*- and how *dare* you - you *insinuate* that- with a *grounder*, no less! - I've never - who would even *want*-?!"

Ratchet shook his head in grandfatherly disappointment at Starscream's nonsensical stream of half-formed denials, slipping a hand into his subspace and pulling out a small silicone ring. He took Starscream's wrist and unceremoniously slapped it against his open palm. "You know where to stick this, I presume?"

Starscream glared hotly, wing tips shuddering with rage.

"Use it. It's fine if you don't like the TSBs but you're going use *something* because I know a smart mech like you doesn't really want to spark themselves up in the middle of a war on a alien planet." Ratchet closed Starscream's fingers over the valvular ring. "Do you?"

Starscream exhaled heavily through his olfactory. "You think I care what you think of me?"

"No, I don't think you care what anyone thinks, Starscream," Ratchet answered tonelessly. "Otherwise someone might have been able to talk some sense into you by now."

He flashed Megatron a Look. The warlord, as usual, remained completely unhelpful, happy to let Starscream plough through with whatever insane plan he had concocted.

"If you come to your senses," Ratchet continued quietly, releasing Starscream's wrist and turning back towards the door. "And do decide to wait, after this war there won't be any barriers stopping you from getting an experienced medic."

"I am *not* trying to get *sparked*!" Starscream roared after him.

Ratchet rolled his optics. What was it about these seekers and treating him like an idiot?

As much as Thundercracker had tried -and Ratchet really couldn't fault his effort- Sunstorm found out about the workshop. Or the '*conspiracy to sin*' as he had called it.

Skywarp explained that Decepticon gossip was a thing of unstoppable force and the only way for three Decepticons to really keep a secret was if two of them were dead. But Ratchet already had evidence that that wasn't necessarily true, not with Skywarp himself standing in front of him carrying on with his *own* secret relationship.

Someone had deliberately told Sunstorm to stir up trouble, and given that the introduction of contraception had been widely welcomed by (with the exception of Sunstorm) all but *one*, Ratchet knew exactly which petty, tri-coloured, *idiot* it was going to be that spilled the energon beans.

He hated the idea of sinking to Starscream's level in tit for tat, but part of him was really starting to hope Primus's Number One Fan-Bot did get hold of Starscream and melt his stupid wings off.

Ratchet dropped his head into his hands with a sigh. Between Sunstorm actively seeking out and destroying the contraceptives he had betrayed his own faction to procure, and Starscream setting the worst example to everyone else by refusing to use them anyway, he was wondering again why he fragging bothered?

A less involved medic would have just told them all to practice the art of 'Pulling Out'.

And if things didn't improve and Ratchet actually had to swallow his pride and appeal to *Megatron* to get the big dolt to *control his lunatic seekers* he was never going to recover from this bout of captivity.

The one small mercy in what had been an otherwise rubbish day, was that Soundwave was back, arriving Earth-side by space bridge exactly one minute before midnight, cutting it rather fine. Ratchet assumed the time away had done him good, as when he arrived in Ratchet's repair the next morning he was straight-backed, bright-visored, and cassette free, and had even been thoughtful enough to pick up 'gift' for Ratchet from Cybertron.

He brought a glimmering cockpit canopy out of his subspace and held it out to Ratchet wordlessly.

Ratchet's mouth snapped shut where it had opened to make a joke about how Soundwave might have filled all his time alone with Shockwave on Cybertron.

He stared.

"Where did you get this?"

"Cybertron."

Ratchet raised a brow. "*Where* on Cybertron?"

"Shockwave."

Primus, it was like interrogating a toddler. "And where did *he* get it?"

"I was not at liberty to ask."

Which meant it's sourcing had been somewhat immoral.

"Alright," Ratchet took it off his hands, weighing it and flipping it over, checking for rust, mites, or damage. "So long as it didn't come of an infected corpse. Did you tell Shockwave what happened with that energon he sent Megatron?"

Soundwave dipped his helm. "Affirmative. Shockwave; will endeavour to take more care in future."

"Do you think if Shockwave put a little more effort into sourcing your materials than he did experimenting on them, he wouldn't need to resort to cannibalising his own mechs?"

Soundwave choose not to pass comment on Shockwave's hobbies. "I was assured the size and model fit Starscream's schematics. His state of disrepair has been of impractical distraction to you."

Ratchet's shoulders tensed, "If I'd known you'd come back this talkative I wouldn't have sent you away." He grumbled. "And let me *assure* you, Starscream only *wishes* he was enough to distract me."

He set the canopy down and sighed. "Besides, that idiot seeker doesn't want fixing."

"Starscream's wishes are not paramount. His functionality and effectiveness in battle are."

Ratchet snorted, "What do you expect me to do? Hold him down and fix him against his will? Unless you've got an unbreakable lasso in there too-"

Soundwave crossed the repair bay and stood opposite Ratchet on the other side of the med-berth. He flicked an unseen button on the underside of the berth. Suddenly, out of barely visible seams, thick steel restraints shot out and locked with an ominous *clank*. One for each ankle and wrist.

Ratchet stared, bracing his hands against his hips, "...I need to get one of these for the *Ark*."

Praxus Fold'em

Ratchet's headache of the day came from learning that Starscream's disruptive behaviour was *so* predictable that sensible, farsighted individuals had seen fit to outfit the Decepticon base with something called 'Starscream Cages'.

There were six in total. One in the Command Centre, another the Throne Room. The location of the other four had not yet been disclosed to Ratchet, but Soundwave reassured him that the chore of luring the disagreeable seeker into one would not be difficult, should Ratchet 'require' his capture.

Ratchet had imagined a huge gilded birdcage, dangling from the ceiling, swaying back and forth as Starscream howled and fought from the inside. It turned out to be something rather more advanced than that, given the Second in Command's accomplished history of escape artistry. Something to do with electrocuting energy bars that were programmed to shoot down from the ceiling and trap Starscream in his own little energy bubble.

The Autobot in Ratchet said it would be barbaric to imprison Starscream and force repairs on him. Though the pragmatic medic in Ratchet said it would serve the seeker right for being so fragging difficult. And be immensely entertaining to boot. He wondered after the circumstances that had led to Megatron approving such a targeted failsafe.

"That's not how I do things," Ratchet eventually rejected Soundwave's generous offer. "I don't force treatment on unwilling patients. Besides, it'll be that much more satisfying to watch Starscream swallow his pride and come here willingly."

"Unlikely," Soundwave watched him pace. "Starscream; does not possess processing capacity for reasoned judgment."

Ratchet tapped a screwdriver against his chin, thinking, "I always thought he was vain."

"Affirmative."

A smile curled Ratchet's mouth as he began to calculate a plan, "Alright. Mention that I have *one* spare canopy part, and make some passing comment about his declining looks."

Soundwave stared at him.

"What now?" Ratchet sighed.

"Undesirable outcome. Risk to life; high."

"Then get someone else to call him ugly," Ratchet frowned. "Someone he's less likely to kill."

Soundwave was not very forthcoming on any designations.

Ratchet threw up his hands, tossing the screwdriver at the equipment table. "Fine, I'll have Skywarp do it. And maybe a few other dozen mechs. Run his self-confidence into the ground. That'll bring him around."

Soundwave nodded and straightened. "A far less insensitive solution than taking him captive."

Ratchet had the distinct feeling Soundwave was being sarcastic. "I think the prima-donna of seeker

hierarchy can take a little criticism. He knows that broken canopy is an eyesore, he's just too petty to let me do anything about it. I'm amazed he hasn't inhaled any of the glass shards into his air vents."

He glared up at Soundwave, wondering if he should tell the Decepticon Officer what he had learned from his joyous trip to Starscream's lab-quarters. No one could reason with Starscream, but Ratchet had it on good authority that Soundwave had *Megatron's* audial. As whipped as Starscream seemed to have Megatron in regards to their personal life together, if Soundwave could convince Megatron that Starscream's personal ambitions would jeopardise the success of his war campaign, he might finally put his pede down.

Starscream's stubborn face appeared in his mind's eye, wing tips shaking with rage, unrepentant, denying all knowledge of what Ratchet was accusing him off.

He sighed, dismissing the idea.

But Soundwave was unfortunately observant -the benefit of being an immoral telepath Ratchet supposed. He felt deft mental fingers slip over his mind curiously, and quickly threw up his mental shields, boosting his firewall with a glare in Soundwave's direction.

"Careful," He warned him.

"Soundwave; detects high levels of anxiety from the medic."

"I'm not anxious!" Ratchet snarled. "I'm fed up with you and your joke of a faction. So why don't you do us all a favour and get out there and start tearing apart Starscream's self image before someone loses an optic to the four-inch *shards of glass* he's spilling everywhere!"

Unlike many of his comrades Soundwave knew when to quit. He gave Ratchet a curt nod. "Out of gratitude for your assistance, I will fulfil your request."

Ratchet wondered why the heck Soundwave seemed to think helping Ratchet repair a member of his own command staff was going to be a favour to him. He rolled his optics and waved him off, listening to the door seal shut as he began to clear away for the day.

He cast a resentful glare towards the crate in the corner of the repair bay, half hidden under a dirty tarp, where he had hidden the remaining contraceptives from any potential Sunstorm ordered raids. He had heard the air barracks had been searched and pillaged the day before, so it was only a matter of time before that golden nightmare was going to come after the source. It was a small miracle the seeker had yet to directly confront him. He could only assume someone with more influence was protecting him.

He wished this was the first time he had experienced this sort of situation - a well meaning (and sometimes *not*) individual inflicting their own moral stance on everyone else by condemning this sort of technology as against Primus's Will. It had been particularly difficult to distribute the tech during the time running up to the war. With such vast a population of the planet near starvation, spark reproduction had dropped to an all time low as so few mecha had the capacity to carry. Cold constructs were still -and in many ways still *are*- seen as the undesirable alternative to increase a dwindling labor force, but fearful of the their numbers rising to the point they then became the majority, there had been a huge push for mecha to produce natural sparklings.

Ratchet remembered coming in to his med-centre one shift to find the place ransacked, equipment, chemicals, parts, *everything* missing. He had never been able to figure out if it had been a desperate mech in need it, or someone out to stop anyone else having it.

He wasn't going to let that happen again.

He tugged the corner of the tarp down, hiding the crate completely. No radioactive hands were getting their toxic little fingers into it on his watch.

With the seemingly never ending supply of Starscream-related dramas, he being distracted from the real hurdles placed ahead of him by the Decepticon campaign against common sense. He still had to think about how these mecha were meant to fuel themselves on the dregs of low quality energy they managed to pilfer from private human companies. Ratchet wasn't much of a capitalist and didn't really care for the moral dilemmas of stealing to survive, but he couldn't condone the casualties that came with Decepticon raids.

He wondered how wrong it would be if he sent Ravage into the *Ark* to steal energon next?

He shook his helm. It was late, his processor was wondering places it shouldn't have been. If the Decepticons devoted half as much energy into creating ways of developing their own fuel sources as they did stealing, this would be a none issue.

A knock sounded against his doorway.

He hadn't heard the door open. He whirled around, hiding the crate from view, and glared when he found it was only Skywarp.

"Didn't think you'd still be here. It's pretty late," Skywarp smirked, tilting his head. "Whatcha hiding?"

"Sins," Ratchet growled, stepping away from it, "where Sunstorm hopefully won't think to look for them. What do you want?" He considered the lateness of the hour, then grimaced. "You haven't done something unpleasant to Thundercracker, have you?"

"Always," Skywarp smirked, "but I was gonna invite you to a cyber-poker game."

"Poker?" Ratchet wrinkled his nose.

"We need a dealer," Skywarp waved at him to come over, not taking his clearly reluctant tone as an obvious rejection of the offer. "An impartial dealer," he added, expression darkening, "since no one around here can be trusted not to fragging cheat."

"What are you betting with?" Ratchet asked curiously. It wouldn't be energon -he hoped to Primus no Decepticons were stupid enough to trade their minuscule rations- and shanix had little value on this planet.

"This and that," Skywarp didn't really answer the question. "You know; stolen goods. Family heirlooms. Blow jobs."

Ratchet's glare hardened into ice.

"I'm kidding!" Skywarp laughed. "Wegivethoseawayforfree, c'mon!"

The last part was said in such rush Ratchet was still deciphering whether it was another joke or not when Skywarp took his wrist and teleported him. The usual disconcerting but at least tolerable sensation of moving through time and space followed. Ratchet grit his denta against the feeling, curling his hands into fists.

When it all finally stopped, he was in a much darker place. The scent of salt and rust was stronger

and the air felt thick with moisture. Ratchet opened his optics to the dim basement level of the underwater base. The ceiling and bulkheads were hidden behind thick bundled lengths of wire cabling and tubes of plumbing, and everything was cast in a warm orange glow by the ceiling height guide lights. Overall, the atmosphere reminded Ratchet of the seedy underbelly of pre-war Kaon.

"Whoa, you convinced the Autobot to play?" A voice exclaimed.

Ratchet turned to face a large round table set up with black glass cards, surrounded by Decepticons tapping their fingers impatiently. Blitzwing, the speaker, was grinning at the sight of him. With him, sat on variously sized crates and barrels, was Slipstream, Swindle, and Rumble and Frenzy (sharing one seat).

"I'm not playing," Ratchet folded his arms.

"He's dealing," Skywarp leaned close to set his smile next to Ratchet's scowl.

"*I'm* the dealer," Swindle protested.

"Yeah, and ain't it funny how you always win?" Frenzy glared at him suspiciously.

"C'mon, let the medic hang out with us," Skywarp clapped Ratchet's back. "He works hard, he deserves a break, getting to watch me send you guys back to your quarters crying."

"You're the worst player here, Warp," Blitzwing said casually. "That's why we always invite you."

Skywarp left Ratchet and moved to take a seat. There was an open space for a Ratchet to stand, the decks of slim black glass cards waiting to be dealt. He sighed, "What are you playing?"

"Praxus fold'em," Skywarp cracked his knuckles.

"Isn't that a game for hookers and addicts," Ratchet muttered, picking up the deck.

"Yep, that's us," Skywarp smiled.

Ratchet began to shuffle the deck. Optics focused on his hands and he threw in a little flourish to make it worth their while, spinning card's between his fingers, flipping them up and over each other. The cassette twins' optics were wide and bright as they watched him. With a flash of golden light against dark glass, Ratchet dealt two cards down to each player, then five face up.

"You could have been one the best dealers on the gambling moon with hands that fast," Swindle complimented, peeling his card's up to check them.

"Yes," Ratchet agreed, "because dealing cards is that much more rewarding than saving lives."

"Depends on the life," Slipstream's murmured quietly, laying her cards flat.

Ratchet found himself preferring it when she *didn't* speak. "I see your lisp has finally gone," he commented.

Slipstream's expression didn't change.

Needless to say, with a face like that she won the first game. And the second, and the third, pulling the pot towards her, stacked high with stolen tat, fancy looking weapons, and even a few of the TSBs.

"Skywarp," Ratchet snapped, "those weren't for betting!"

"I didn't expect to lose them?!" Skywarp protested helplessly. "I thought you were going to help me win?! Aren't we friends?!"

Ratchet didn't dignify that with a response.

"Don't try and go making friends with Bots, Warp. You're setting yourself up for spark-break," Blitzwing patted his wing. Skywarp flicked it angrily.

"Why's that?" Ratchet paused between dealing.

Blitzwing ducked his head and focused on his cards, not quite brave enough to explain himself. Ratchet cast the insulting assumption that Autobot made bad friends from his mind. It was *Decepticons* that were the unapproachable ones. They made enemies out of every species they encountered. Including their own.

It was well past midnight on the surface by the time the last game was winding down. Rumble and Frenzy lost Ratbat to Slipstream, but sensible enough to know incurring the wrath of Soundwave brought no one any good, Slipstream was kind enough to gift the smallest cassette back to them. Skywarp wasn't so lucky, and was unable to plead for the return of a can of old pre-war Cybertronian polish - that actually looked strikingly familiar to Ratchet, though he could place from where.

"You don't even *use* polish," Skywarp argued, "C'mon Slip', you've had your fun."

"I don't use it," Slipstream agreed, screwing off the top and giving it an appreciative sniff. "But I know someone who does. It's been centuries since Nova had a decent polish."

"Starscream's going to kill me," Skywarp whispered mournfully, watching Slipstream hide her winnings in her subspace - along with Starscream's polish, which explained where Ratchet had seen it before.

"You want my advice?" Ratchet leaned forwards and swept up all the cards, pushing them into a neat stack. "Cyber Poker's not your game."

Skywarp propped his chin against his fist miserably, "Yeah, I know."

"Then why do you play it?"

"It's not all about winning," Skywarp flashed him a condescending smile, "I mean sure, it's great when you do-"

"When?" Ratchet found himself stifling a smirk. "When have you *ever* won?"

"Back in Kaon," a wistful look crossed Skywarp's face. "In those big speakeasies they had under the arenas. Screamer used to serve drinks in one of back rooms where the high-rollers played- those mecha that came from out of state to bet big on the fights. He'd lean around them all seductively when he brought them their engex. I could see the reflection of their cards against his cockpit."

Ratchet was momentarily speechless.

Skywarp smiled, "When they finally caught us, they kicked the scrap out of us," he laughed lightly. "If I hadn't been able to teleport us..."

He trailed off, smile less wistful now.

A tightness had closed around Ratchet's air vents. He cleared his vocaliser and pushed the card deck back to Skywarp. Skywarp slipped them into his subspace.

"You've known each other a long time, haven't you?"

Skywarp looked up, surprised. "Yeah," he said lightly. "I know he's jerk, but, you know," he shrugged.

He didn't need to finish the sentence for Ratchet to understand his meaning. Trining was a concept beyond him - as a grounder and as someone who had only ever visited Vos as a tourist. He knew unimportant, mass-produced seekers weren't often given a choice of trine-mates, and were crammed into trios decided by a random number generator, outside of any measure of compatibility.

That didn't seem to be the case here; but Ratchet couldn't imagine anyone forming an unbreakable, life long bond with Starscream through *choice* -unless they were completely insane, like Megatron.

"I finally got hold of a canopy for him," Ratchet told Skywarp. "I'd let him know, but I've been *banned* from his presence. Will you tell him to stop by the repair bay for me? So I can finally fix the jagged health hazard sticking out of his chassis?"

Skywarp blinked up at him, "Sure, but just so you know, Screamer doesn't listen to me."

"I think he does," Ratchet corrected him. "I think he cares about what you have to say more than you realise."

Skywarp didn't look entirely convinced. "What makes you think that?"

Ratchet thought back to the few times he'd had the misfortune of talking to Starscream, and how often his trine had been brought up in the middle of an argument. Starscream did *not* like that Ratchet had a rapport with them.

*'Don't you **dare** try to tell me you give a flying scrap about my trine.'*

"Just a feeling," Ratchet shrugged.

Of all the things Ratchet had expected to have to do to try and coax Starscream back onto the edge of reason, it was not sending Skywarp, the least logic ruled of *all* the Decepticons, to talk him around that he had thought would work.

And yet, here a sullen Starscream stood, fingers reluctantly threaded between a smiling Skywarp's, weaponless and ready for treatment.

"Have you inspected it for mites?" Starscream demanded, the lines under his optics heavy and deep. His optics had lost some of their powerful brightness as well. Perhaps he hadn't fuelled this morning. A wise decision on Skywarp's part to get him here early, before his sense of pride awoke that stubbornness.

"See for yourself," Ratchet waved him towards where the canopy sat waiting, knowing the seeker wouldn't believe him anyway.

Starscream shook his fingers free of Skywarp and marched across the repair bay to inspect it. Ratchet stared at Skywarp in amazement. "What did you tell him?"

"What you told me to, that you had a cockpit."

Ratchet studied him, looking for signs of deception. "And that's all?"

Skywarp looked away, "Well maybe some other sappy stuff too but what's said between trine, stays between trine," Skywarp pointed at Ratchet sternly.

Ratchet snorted, glancing over his shoulder to where Starscream was holding the canopy under the light to study it at a near atomic level for imperfections.

"He wouldn't be such a pain if you were nice to him," Skywarp added quietly.

Ratchet's frown deepened. "I *am* nice."

Skywarp pulled a face.

"And I don't allow sass in my repair bay," Ratchet shooed him away impatiently, "I can handle him, go."

Skywarp was reluctant, and hesitated before leaving. Ratchet wondered what the Pit they had said to each other in the last twelve hours to have brought about such a change. It was clear there was more of a relationship than Ratchet had first assumed. Skywarp and Thundercracker had been treating Starscream as a self-reliant loner earlier. *Cockroachy*- Skywarp had even called him. Not someone that *needed* worrying about.

It was going to take all the patience in the universe, but Ratchet was actually going to have to use some of the outdated bedside-manner programming he had all but thrown out.

A shame, he had been looking forward to testing out the restraints.

"Happy?" He called to Starscream, wiping a cloth over the repair berth to rid it of oil residue and shrapnel from the last patient.

"It will suffice," Starscream agreed tonelessly, setting it back down.

Ratchet let Starscream arrange himself in his own time, waiting until he was lying prone on the berth with his helm turned away. Ratchet began peeling away the duct-taped mess, biting his tongue to keep from grumbling reprimands as he plucked pieces of loose glass out of the cockpit. Tiny shards were everywhere, so he was forced to locate a vacuum.

Starscream lay still and unspeaking for the entire mortifying ordeal of being hoovered out.

"It wouldn't have been this bad if you had come earlier," Ratchet couldn't help himself.

A finger twitched on the berth, so far the only response Starscream had given him. "You didn't have the parts earlier."

"Just because I couldn't attach a new one doesn't mean you had to walk around wearing this broken deathtrap," Ratchet's jaw was tight as he began detaching the canopy frame. "I could have boarded it up with a temporary cover."

"It was fine," Starscream sounded tense.

Ratchet tugged at a particularly stiff bolt and rocked Starscream's frame on the berth. Starscream snapped his head towards him with a glare.

"Was it really," Ratchet continued, in a faux-conversational tone. "Or were you just worried that missing hardware would compromise potential spark creation."

Starscream said nothing, not even a ranting denial this time. Ratchet took care in loosening the remaining bolts, disconnecting the wiring ("This will feel a little numb for a while") and finally lifted the smashed canopy away.

The new one was a perfect fit, though would need repainting to match the rest of Starscream's frame. The glass was a slighter warmer gold than the last had been but he was sure Starscream could cope. He began attaching it, starting at the top, just below Starscream's neck.

The intake tube of which he noticed was clenching and unclenching like Starscream was swallowing down nerves. Ratchet slowed down, waiting...

"I'm not a young mech," Starscream finally spoke.

"No," Ratchet agreed, "None of us are anymore."

"Then wouldn't you agree that gestating a protoform during a war is better than not having young at all?"

Ratchet paused. He didn't look up to meet Starscream's gaze. "No, I wouldn't."

His hands were knocked out of place when Starscream sat up abruptly, "When you said a better time was '*when this is all over*', when, *exactly*, did you imagine that would be? Next month? Next year? Another four million years?"

Ratchet took a step back, glaring at him, "Seeing as *I'm* not the warmonger in the room, is that really a question you should be asking me? You want this blasted war to end, maybe you should tell the aft hole you're sleeping with that *started it* to surrender!?"

"Oh yes," Starscream crooned, clasping his hands together in mocking wistfulness, "and then the two of us can live happily ever after with all our second-class, Decepticon-coded offspring under an oppressive Autobot rule. Just the sort of paradise we've been fighting for all these years. Won't *that* be wonderful!"

Ratchet set down his tools and braced his hands against his hips to maximise the force of his disapproval. "Setting aside the lunacy of bringing a sparkling into this sort of society, just what are you planning on fuelling this sparkling with? The same stolen half-rations that barely keep your subordinates alive?!"

Starscream looked away sharply. "I've waited too long as it is."

Ratchet felt exhausted, "Starscream, for *goodness sake*-"

"I don't know why you're bothering to lecture me," Starscream snarled heatedly, "In case it wasn't obvious to the alleged Greatest Medic on Cybertron, it's probably already too late! You think I decided to do this on a whim? That I haven't been trying for years already?!"

He looked away sharply. Ratchet opened his mouth to call him a rude name - then shut it again, remembering Skywarp's suggestion to be ...ugh, *nice*.

"Starscream, you're not that old."

"How would you know?"

"Because *I'm* old," he rolled his optics, picking up his tool and nudging Starscream to lay back again. "Let me finish this up, then we'll take a look."

"At what?" Starscream frowned, hesitantly obeying.

Ratchet raised a brow.

Starscream swallowed, "You're not planning on sterilising me, are you?"

Starscream was speaking from a dark place of experience. Ratchet didn't laugh.

"No," he said gently, "I'm going to make sure everything's in working order, and then we can continue arguing about this poor sparkling you want to bring into the world."

Once the canopy was reattached and Starscream performed adequate tests to ensure the wiring was correct, Ratchet moved down the berth to examine him - just when he thought he'd seen *enough* Decepticon valves as it was.

Despite Starscream's fears, everything was in working order, and with the additional fuel rations he'd been privileged with, so was he. By all evidence, if Starscream were interfacing with a fellow properly fuelled, healthy Cybertronian, he might have sparked himself a passenger by now.

Which was another problem.

Telling Starscream that his lack of progress was likely down to *Megatron's* under-fuelled but easily rectified condition would undoubtably lead to Starscream getting his way and becoming sparked, which Ratchet would really rather not happen. He could omit that information. He probably should.

He didn't.

"It's Megatron," he finished up, stepping away from Starscream. "With your extra fuel, you're fine. Would have no problem with sparking and gestation. His transfluid's simply not potent enough to knock you up right now."

Starscream was looking up at him, stunned. And perhaps a little relieved. "I'm not too old?"

"**No**." Ratchets snarled, sick of him saying that. If Starscream was old, he was decrepit. "And I'm finished so go on, skip off to Megatron, pump his fuel tanks full of energon and make some more bad decisions."

Starscream sat up slowly, "There's no deterioration of the gestation-?"

"*Sweetie*," Ratchet bent so he was eye level with the seeker, bracing his hands on his knees. "Listen to me, those gestation tanks are built to last. *You'll* start falling apart before it does, especially if you've a good medic around to keep it ship shape."

Starscream even didn't punch him for the patronising pet name. His lips pursed together thoughtfully. After a lengthy pause, he swung his legs back into the berth and lay back. "You win."

Ratchet straightened in surprise, "Win what?"

"I'll wait for a better world," Starscream clarified, opening his legs little. "And you'll make yourself available to replace the baffles you're about to install in me every century until that world appears, agreed?"

Ratchet could scarcely believe the scenario unfolding before him. *Starscream* had been reasoned with. *Starscream* was putting aside his own impulsive, selfish desires for the sake of someone else's needs.

Ratchet smiled and went to fetch a pair, "You have yourself deal, Commander."

Movie Night

The concept of Starscream as a 'friend' would have glitched Ratchet's processor into irreparable scrap, so for the sake of his continued sanity, he didn't. Instead, Starscream was merely a convenient ally in his war against ignorance and malpractice.

And a good one at that. For all his outlandish dramatics and demands, Starscream could be refreshingly pragmatic and even sensible when it so suited him. Somewhere between Ratchet repairing his cockpit canopy and giving him blunt but reassuring advice on the state of his internal workings, something seemed to have clicked in the seeker's processor.

Although it clearly wasn't Starscream's habit to make friends out of those who dared challenge him, there were some obvious exceptions to that rule. Ratchet appeared to have slipped into that minuscule crack in Starscream's defensive walls.

He wasn't entirely sure it was a grouping he wanted to be part of, considering the company (a lunatic warlord and his reckless trine-mates) and the treacherous seekers penchant for taking advantage of others. Until Starscream decided to prove him wrong. Ten times over.

Ratchet didn't pay much attention when his socket wrench disappeared- given that it was broken, stuck on one size setting, and approximately three billion years old - until it reappeared again later that evening; shiny, repaired, and modified for an even greater range of sizes. Something Ratchet desperately needed when Decepticon triple changers were so clumsy *and* argumentative.

He shook his head and passed it off as Soundwave's work, and said nothing as more tools disappeared, one by one, only to reappear hours later, looking factory new - until one cycle when he returned from his morning refuel with Breakdown and caught the seeker red handed.

"What are you doing with *that*?!" Ratchet barked at Starscream, stumbling back warily when the seeker turned with the disc cutter in hand. Breakdown matched his retreat, trying to shift his bulk behind Ratchet and use him as an Autobot shaped-shield -some fearless warrior he was.

Starscream scowled petulantly, thumbing the disc cutter on and off to deafen the occupants of the room with it's shrill squealing. "I'm - - it!" He was barely audible over the audial piercing *whiiir*.

"Put it down!" Ratchet ordered in his most thunderous voice, one he used almost exclusively on the Dinobots. He brandished his index finger threateningly, half convinced Starscream was going to rush at him with it. "Put. It. *Down*!"

Starscream switched it off and stared at him, "Do you want it fixed or not?"

Ratchet blinked. Behind him Breakdown poked his head out curiously, "You're not gonna dismember someone with that, are you?"

One of Starscream's optics twitched. Breakdown grunted fearfully and ducked down again.

"I couldn't even if I tired," Starscream drawled, fingering the circular blade. "This thing is so blunt I'd have trouble cutting through an organic."

Ratchet grimaced at that lovely mental image. "What do you mean 'repair' it," he said impatiently. "This is specialised equipment-"

"I'm a scientist," Starscream reminded him testily.

"You majored in *astronomy*, *not* engineering, *not* mechanics-

"It was the only field I was *allowed to pursue*," Starscream growled through clenched denta. "Now, do you want the fragging thing fixed, or thrown at your head?"

Ratchet glowered, "I'm assuming there's not a third option where you leave me alone."

Starscream lifted the tool threateningly.

"Yes!" Breakdown interjected swiftly, thrusting out a splayed hand. "He means 'yes', we'd like it fixed, Screamer."

Starscream's optics burned.

"Commander!" Breakdown hastily corrected.

Satisfied, Starscream nodded firmly, chin high. "You'll have it back before the end of the day, no need to thank me," he passed them aloofly.

Ratchet shared a perplexed look with Breakdown after the seeker had left, but the Decepticon seemed no more clued in to the Air Commander's unusual behaviour than he himself was. Ratchet simply had to hope he wouldn't be awoken in the middle of the off-shift to hear Starscream had taken the 'harmless' disc cutter on a mad spree and he'd be required to reattach the innumerable limbs of the victims.

But that evening the disc cutter was returned as promised, resharpened, cleaned up, and modified to cut through even armour as dense as Megatron's - or so Starscream claimed. Ratchet did wonder how he knew the exact thickness of Megatron's armour. Even for the closest of couples, that was a weird thing to know.

Starscream handed it over and waited expectantly, his arms folded across his turbine chest and sharp, elegant nose stuck in the air - a contrast to his gradually drooping wings.

Ratchet turned the tool over in his hands, suspicious. He switched it on, half expecting the thing to transform into a deadly weapon designed to kill him in revenge for all the disagreements he and the seeker had had in their time together as prisoner and captor. It didn't.

He turned it off, "What's your game?"

Starscream's piercing optics met his gaze, "You think I have time for games?"

Ratchet set the tool aside. "You're not known for your accommodating personality. This-" he twitched his helm in the direction the disc cutter, "is bordering on helpful. So what are you buttering me up for? Planning an assassination? Want me to botch someone's repairs?"

Starscream leaned back on his heels and stared at him condescendingly.

Ratchet lowered his voice, "If you're having second thoughts about the baffles-"

"I'll thank you *not* to bring up my reproductive functions without prompt in future," Starscream cut him off rapidly. "These tools are junk! I was merely bringing them up to standard. You should be grateful. But clearly that's beyond you entitled Autobots."

Ratchet didn't believe it. He *couldn't* believe it. Because that would mean Starscream was capable of goodwill and that went against the natural order of the universe.

"You're a clever brat, I'll give you that, but I'm going to figure you out." Ratchet told him threateningly. He gathered up his refurbished, useable tools and ignored the little swelling of appreciation that rose up in him. "Now unless you've gotten something stuck somewhere, you can go. This isn't a recreation room, no matter how often your seekers like to treat it as one."

"Only some of them are mine," Starscream admitted, grumbling.

Ratchet scoffed, "You're the Air Commander, aren't you."

"Yes," Starscream hissed. "But insubordination is rife, thanks to you and your politics-"

"Politics?!" Ratchet's voice pitched up. "I'm a medic! What is so political about telling them to use firewalls and wear spike-caps when they're clanging? How can *medicine* be political?"

"I could ask you the same, Autobot." Starscream leaned in close to sneer. "But since you're so keen on bringing politics into this," he began, forgetting entirely that he had been the one to first mention it, "I'll remind you that thanks to the society *you* were fighting to defend, the only education half those bimbos have ever gotten came from the empty golden-head of that iodine-drenched messiah, so yes, you're going to think they're all a bunch of virus-riddled, clueless idiots, and maybe you're right-"

He smiled nastily, "-but whose fault is that, really?"

Ratchet chewed on the meshy inside of his cheek resentfully. Starscream wasn't ...wrong. But Ratchet certainly wasn't going to let him think he was completely right about something. The world could end.

"You should have dealt with Sunstorm centuries ago," he grumbled.

Starscream rolled his optics. "He wasn't *around* centuries ago, why else would he be so stupid?"

A creepy feeling fell over Ratchet then, "Damn it all to hell, he's not *actually* a clone is he?" He looked Starscream up and down wearily, noting the thousands of similarities. Starscream said nothing to deny it.

Oh Primus, he'd hoped it was a bad joke.

"*Starscream*-"

"It's nothing to do with me."

"He looks just like you."

"Yes, I'm *aware*," Starscream's dark face took on a flush of colour, "You'll have to ask Shockwave where he found him. I'm sure the story he tells you will be just as inventive as the one I was given."

"What *did* he tell you?" Ratchet wasn't usually tempted by something as juvenile as gossip. But Decepticon gossip? Starscream gossip? There was something about the lead seeker, something about his bitter, unsocial outlook on life that promised whatever mud he had to sling, it would be juicy.

Starscream opened his mouth -and looked ready to begin a brutally slanderous personal attack on Shockwave's character, motivations, and what the Pit might have possessed him to make a *Starscream-clone* over all other possible Decepticon coding he could have messed with - before

coming to his senses.

"Looking for a career change into intelligence, are we?" he scoffed, shaking his head. "If Sunstorm bothers you that much, poison him yourself. You can give him a cube of blue-dyed acid and I promise you he'll drink it if you said it was from Primus's holy waste-tank."

"I'm not here to kill anyone," Ratchet growled. "I don't even care about condemning his beliefs, he's welcome to them. It's his insistence on forcing them on everyone else. Starscream, he tried to *kill* you over your relationship with Mega-

Starscream cut him off with a sharp hiss. "*Thank you* for your concern, but I'm not going to be kept up at night, quaking in fear over someone whose idea of an assassination is a *hug*."

"A radioactive hug."

"If he gets out of hand someone can just shoot him," Starscream snapped callously. "He has no sense of self-preservation because he thinks he's protected by Primus's will. It'd be like shooting a gilded duck. Even *Misfire* could do it."

Ratchet did not want to like Starscream. Especially as he was being so flippant about murdering one of his own seekers -however much he denied that particular seeker was his- but it was oddly reassuring to be around someone so ruthlessly mean spirited.

It reminded him of Prowl.

And what more than that, it reminded him that despite his bleak outlook on the world and his reputation as a grump, compared with some, he was a pillar of patience and compassion.

It was a week full of surprises for Ratchet. Just when he thought he had the enemy faction figured out, they collectively decided to throw him for a loop.

"A *movie* night?" Ratchet stared at Dead End incredulously.

"It's not my idea," Dead End defended himself. "Like I'd choose to waste a whole evening watching organic porn when we could all be dead tomorrow."

Ratchet could feel that his mouth had fallen open, was hanging on it's hinges in a highly undignified fashion, but he was unable to close it.

"It was Drag Strip's idea of research," Dead End carried on, realising the necessity for explanations. He was leaning against Ratchet's doorway with a forlorn yet accepting expression. "'*Can't beat the organics if we don't know the organics*'," he always says, but then everyone else found out about it and thought it'd be a laugh to crash the study group, but then they got hooked and now everyone crams themselves into the Command Centre every seventh cycle as soon as Megatron's off shift to watch 'Ghostbusters' as if that's going to stop everyone starving to death as soon as the stock pile-

"Wait wait wait," Ratchet stopped him, "'Ghostbusters' isn't a-" Ratchet exhaled exasperatedly, "That's just a movie. It's not *porn*."

Dead End wrinkled his nose, "They film themselves *kissing*."

Ratchet thought it best not to explain how much worse it could get. Dead End was, after all, only about six months old. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Breakdown wants you there."

"Tell him no."

"If you don't come there will be fights," Dead End's shoulders slumped, "There's *always* fights but there will be more fights with Shockwave's seekers here. They suck."

Ratchet privately agreed with him, but still, "I am not your babysitter. Ask Soundwave."

"He says it's a waste of his time. He gives migraines to anyone that tries to invite him along."

Ratchet scowled, wishing he had an outlier ability to make people terrified of him, "Starscream then."

Dead End rolled his optics, "Who do you think is starting the fights?"

Ratchet dropped his face into his hands.

The movie wasn't, as Ratchet had been promised, 'Ghostbusters', because Starscream had hijacked the evening (apparently not an unusual occurrence) and switched to the much less appealing but somehow incredibly fitting 'The Terminator'. Ratchet hadn't watched any of these films as he had a hundred better things to be doing with his time than investing himself in human pop culture drivel just to relate to the likes of Spike and Sparkplug, but he had unfortunately heard the full plot synopsis of this one from a drugged-up-to-his-chevrons Bluestreak one evening when he'd been working on him.

It was violent. Many people died. It involved killer robots. It was Sideswipe's favourite film.

Ratchet was not in the least surprised to hear Starscream wanted to watch it.

Despite Dead End swearing up and down that the evening was going to be a violent train-wreck as Decepticons fought one another tooth and nail over who had to sit in the floor, who couldn't see past someone's fat head, who wouldn't shut up, and how badly the measly supply of energon dusted rust-corn was being shared out, it was all still fairly sedate when Ratchet arrived.

The majority of movie buffs were already sat contently on the floor, legs crossed, shoulder to shoulder, talking among themselves. Blitzwing and Astrotrain's heights meant they were banished to the back of the group and subjected to the indignity of their smallest comrades sitting on them- Laserbeak and Buzzsaw perched on a shoulder each. Onslaught and his rowdy gestalt were sitting at the front, much to the irritation of the Stunticons behind them, who were taking the opportunity to poke and jab at them. And Ratchet could see *that* breaking out in a fight before the movie even started.

Only a handful of seekers were present though; Skywarp laid out on the floor, reclining sideways between the screen and the Combaticons, and Thundercracker and Starscream bickering over how to force the Command Centre's advanced supercomputer to play a VHS. Starscream -for all his talk of being 'smart'- seemed to think the solution was hitting the side of the monitor and calling it stupid.

"How long is this going to take?" Ratchet demanded. "And i'm not sitting on the floor, I'll never be able to get back up again."

Ratchet eyed the large chair in the middle of the Command Centre, the seat he presumed Megatron lounged in when he shouted his orders and plotted his schemes.

Dead End saw him looking, "Screamer and his trine won't let anyone watch the movie in peace if they don't have The Seat."

All the more reason to steal it for himself. "I thought you didn't want to watch the movie," Ratchet side eyed him.

Dead End looked between it and Ratchet. Deciding it wasn't a battle he wanted to fight, he shrugged. "Your funeral."

Having been dragged along to this thing specifically to prevent fights, Ratchet felt it was rather ironic that he was now going out of his way to cause one by deliberately claiming the only seat -*The Seat*, sat atop the raised dais, with luxuriously wide armrests and backed with a menacing Decepticon insignia, The Seat that was obviously the second throne in everything but name- just to irk Starscream.

Starscream didn't notice at first, too busy calling Thundercracker a variety of nicknames from the juvenile 'Blundercracker' all the way to the uncreative and overused 'dumbaft'. When they finally had the computer working and the opening credits rolling, a chorus of jeers and shouts from the audience demanding they get their 'stupid wings outta the way!' had them scrambling to take a seat. Only to find it claimed.

Starscream stopped short, surprise belying his annoyance. Skywarp and Thundercracker shared a nervous look.

"That is my seat," Starscream stepped onto the dais and told him stiffly.

"Really," Ratchet raised a brow, settling into it comfortably. "I thought it was Megatron's."

Starscream's face darkened.

"You're blocking the screen!" Motormaster's unexpectedly emotional voice shouted below on Ratchet's left, accompanied by a handful of thrown rust-corn that sprinkled off Starscream's wing.

"Don't waste that-!" An admonishing voice followed.

Skywarp, a clear veteran to these movie nights and well aware how quickly a disagreement could spoil the whole evening, rolled his optics and moved in on the seat anyway. "We can share," he claimed, and plonked himself without warning on the armrest, nearly crushing Ratchet's hand under his aft. He draped his arm over the back and made himself comfortable, winking down at Ratchet.

A moment later Thundercracker shrugged and joined on the other side, mirroring Skywarp's positioning.

"Starscream, c'mon you're missing the human genocide," Thundercracker whisper-shouted to their remaining trine-mate, waving him in.

"You can sit in my lap, Screamer!" Astrotrain's voice drifted over from the back, deepening the already thunderous scowl on the seeker's face.

As his alternative options were currently limited to sitting on the floor or in Astrotrain's lap, Starscream made a wise decision in approaching Ratchet.

Given the expression on the seeker's face, Ratchet half expected to be dragged out of the seat and thrown to the floor, but Starscream dropped into his lap instead. The chair was large, but not so much that two mechs their size could have sat side by side. Starscream was heavy as well -the huge pair of wings and all his complicated hardware packed tightly into a lithe frame. Starscream shifted with a self important little huff and his hard aft nearly crushed Ratchet's thighs.

Ratchet brought an arm around Starscream's waist to stop him moving and shifted him into a position that more evenly distributed his phenomenal weight with a soft curse and wince. "By Primus, you're like a tanker with wings-"

Starscream's mouth was unrepentantly curved at the corner, and Thundercracker and Skywarp were very deliberately not looking their way, instead focusing on the post-apocalyptic Earth on screen. Ratchet had to tug Starscream's wing down an inch to see past it.

By human standards it was an okay film. Ratchet was disappointed that the lead killer robot was played by a human, and amused when a sex scene halfway through prompted a series of groans and horrified gasps ("Why do humans get so slimly?" "That's sweat, Blastoff") but it was overall a good experience.

Out of the corner of his optic Ratchet watched the lone bag of rust-corn pass from hand to hand as they shared it between them, with no greedy snatching or bickering. Skywarp even extended it to him absently, optics wide and fixated on the murdering occurring on screen. Ratchet passed it along without taking any, aware of how little they had and guiltily recalling the existence of an entire draw full of treats he had in his CMO's office back on the Ark. The ones he kept for his *good* patients. (Needless to say, he never needed to restock it).

He zoned out towards the end of the film, thinking about his friends on the Ark, and all the movie nights he had been invited to over the months but passed up on. Were they like this? Perhaps, just with better seating and more treats, but equal amounts of bickering. He couldn't imagine Sunstreaker and Sideswipe agreeing on a film. He could imagine Optimus insisting they watch something PG.

He hoped that when he finally found his way back to the Ark he would try to spend a little more time outside the med-bay. Waste away some of his free time doing something unproductive instead of dedicating it all to work. It said something if the Decepticons were more clued in to Earth culture than he was.

Starscream shifted against him and let his head fall against the back of the seat. Ratchet glanced at him, watching the reflection of the screen in his dimmed optics. He leaned in, knowing there was something he needed to say.

"Thanks."

Starscream jumped in his lap, snapping his head towards him. "*What?!*" He sneered like he thought Ratchet had just whispered an insult to him.

"I said thanks," Ratchet growled, glaring at the screen now. "For fixing up the tools. It was ...helpful. You did a good job."

Starscream was staring at him in amazement. He blinked a few times. "I didn't do it for you," he declared snottily.

Thundercracker leaned over the top of Starscream's head, "He did it a little for you."

Starscream turned an interesting shade of purple and elbowed him in the cockpit. *Hard*. So hard in fact, that even over the sounds of the actors screaming and a dramatic soundtrack, Ratchet heard the *crack* of glass as the impact created a web of breakages.

Thundercracker doubled over with a wince, Skywarp called Starscream a slagger, and Ratchet pushed the malicious brat off his lap and sent him clattering to the floor with a furious, "Not again!"

Fragging seekers and their fragging cockpits!

Needles, Pins, And Pointy Things

Thundercracker's canopy was much less twisted out of shape and mangled with duct-tape than Starscream's had been. Rather than detach the entire thing and go through the horrors of trying to source another one, Ratchet was able to simply replace the broken glass panel.

Skywarp was awed with watching Ratchet's quick hands as he worked, a handful of the leftover rust-corn hovering in front of his open mouth, forgotten in his distraction. Thundercracker was lying in his back with his helm hanging over the edge of the repair berth, watching Skywarp watch Ratchet. Starscream, who claimed to have much better things to be doing than watching a medic install a sheet of glass -but in reality was feeling defensive and perhaps even guilty for inflicting the damage in the first place- had stormed off. Which Ratchet assumed was Starscream's way of getting out of having to apologise.

"You ever thought about subspace swiping?" Skywarp asked out of the blue.

"No," Ratchet checked the new glass panel for any gaps. It looked secure. "Why?"

"You'd be good at it," Skywarp finally remembered his rust-corn and shoved the entire handful into his mouth, impressively fitting every last piece.

"Yes, I'll add that to the list of suggested hobbies," Ratchet humoured him. "Card-dealing, and now petty theft. If it weren't for you, Skywarp, my talents would have gone to waste."

"Not *petty* theft," Skywarp said around his mouth full, spraying bits half chewed junk-fuel. Ratchet was fortunately out of the range. Thundercracker sadly wasn't.

"Ew, 'Warp!"

Skywarp smirked unapologetically and swallowed before attempting to speak again. "You know one of Megatron's top assassin's was a swiper? He was homeless back then and now he's loaded."

"Skywarp," Thundercracker said firmly, reminding his trine-mate of the importance of not over-sharing sensitive information regarding their fellow Decepticon warriors with their enemy. Ratchet was impressed with the effectiveness of the blue seeker's upside-down frown, but unfortunately, Skywarp appeared immune.

"Swindle says he could buy his own planet," Skywarp sighed wistfully, clearly thinking that was the peak of success.

"He get rich off the spare shanix he swiped out of subspaces then, did he?" Ratchet asked, tossing aside Thundercracker's broken canopy glass and brushing his hands off.

"Not really," Skywarp admitted. "It was more all the assassinations. You know, Screamer used to-"

"Alright," Thundercracker sat up quickly, interrupting him before he could spill anything juicy. "I think I'm fixed enough."

"You run on along then," Ratchet smirked deviously, "it sounds as if Skywarp and I have plenty to talk about. What was it Starscream used to do?"

Skywarp was so eager to share and so utterly oblivious to his nefarious intentions, that Ratchet almost guilted himself into stopping Skywarp from saying more. It was hardly good form.

But he needn't have worried, Thundercracker did it for him, slapping a hand across Skywarp's mouth.

"Urgh," he pulled a revolted face, "Your mouth is all *sticky*..."

That would have been the rust-corn, Ratchet thought to himself, watching Thundercracker frog march Skywarp out of the repair-bay and out of mischief.

"Stay out of trouble!" Ratchet called after them for good measure, knowing in his spark it would do little good. The Elite trine weren't anymore likely to listen to his nagging than the Lamborghini twins.

He shook his helm angrily. He *had* to stop making that comparison. It wasn't fair.

Thundercracker and Skywarp weren't half as argumentative as those hyperactive thugs.

From what Ratchet could tell Breakdown operated at higher than average stress levels compared to most of his comrades. He was probably about the right amount of stressed for a mech in his situation - living at the bottom of the ocean in a sunken warship that flooded twice a day, surrounded by the worst Cybertronian society had to offer and living off starvation rations - so Ratchet left it well enough alone.

But now he was fidgeting and openly nervous. And *that* was annoying.

Ratchet tolerated it for all of ten seconds whilst he tried to enjoy his minuscule (and he suspected *shrinking*) morning fuel ration in the boisterously-loud-for-seven-in-the-morning Mess Hall, until Breakdown spotted a smudge on his forearm, appeared to panic, and started rubbing at it with his thumb vigorously, and ended up removing the paint completely.

He stared down at the twice as conspicuous silver spot where his bare armour was showing through, "Oops."

"What are you doing?" Ratchet set his cube down with a firm, impatient, *clunk*. "You haven't touched your energon. Are you malfunctioning?"

Breakdown's energon cube sat in front him on the table. He hadn't touched it in the ten minutes they'd been sat at the table and the vultures were starting to circle. Astrotrain had casually passed by their table three times now, his optics unsubtly locked on the cube. Ratchet had quickly learned that those who weren't wise enough to guzzle their fuel were at risk of losing it to their hungrier, meaner comrades.

"It's nothing. M' fine," Breakdown mumbled, snatching up the cube. When he brought it to his mouth, his hand shook.

"You're not fine," Ratchet snatched the energon away and set it aside before Breakdown could drink, standing up so he was in a better position to catch Breakdown's wide jaw and try to prise it open.

His index finger transformed into a thermometer, but Breakdown was fighting him. "Hey-!"

"Hold still-!"

Ratchet jammed his thumb between Breakdown's teeth to prop his jaw open. Breakdown gargled a protest but Ratchet slipped the thermometer in regardless. A second passed before it beeped. Ratchet released his spluttering patient and frowned at the reading. "Normal."

"I said I was fine! You can't just go around sticking things in someone's mouth! Even if you are a medic," Breakdown thumped his fists on the table angrily. He went to take his cube back, but found it was missing. "For crying out-!"

"Well, something's gotten you wound up," Ratchet accused, watching him scoot back from his seat and check under the table for his missing fuel.

"Yeah! The disappearance of my breakfast!" Breakdown exclaimed.

Ratchet decided not to point out Astrotrain's similar disappearance from the Mess. The shuttle was far larger than Breakdown and Ratchet didn't want to make any more work for himself by leading Breakdown into another fight.

He planted his hands on the table and leaned towards Breakdown, pinning him with his most menacing stare. "You tell me what's wrong, right now. Is someone picking on you? Motormaster?" Ratchet's optics narrowed, "*Starscream?*"

"No!"

"Then what is it?"

Breakdown blinked back clear embarrassment, "...It's nothing," he finally mumbled, looking down. "Just some ...just another unit of Decepticons arriving this evening, that's all."

"Arriving here?!" Ratchet wrinkled his nose. "Wonderful. More idiots for me to fix up. Megatron's certainly getting his use out of me."

"Nah, nothing like that," Breakdown was staring down at his scuffed, worn hands. "It's for the-" he cut himself off abruptly.

"For what?" Ratchet leaned on closer, "Not a party, I'm willing to bet. What's Megatron planning on fuelling all these extra intakes with?"

"Uhh..." Breakdown wasn't particularly good at evasion, so Ratchet decided to take pity on him and play along when he clumsily changed the subject with, "Can you touch this up?" He asked, pointing to the missing spot of paint he had rubbed away.

Ratchet held up the forearm and studied it. The entirety of Breakdown's body work was looking a little worn and aged. It was no wonder that his paint had come away so quickly. "You're hardly the vain type."

Breakdown looked away again.

"Who is it?" Ratchet came out and asked him, leaning on his elbows across the table, smirk stretching his lips.

"Who's what?" Breakdown's optics flared fearfully.

"The mech who's arriving the evening, the one that's gotten you all worked up?"

"He's just a- I haven't," Breakdown struggled, "I'm not worked up!"

He thumped the table again to prove it.

"Well, whoever he is, he must be very pretty," Ratchet guessed, looking Breakdown up and down, tutting.

Breakdown's cheeks were glowing, "...Yeah," he murmured forlornly. "He is."

Ratchet was applying a layer of finishing sealant -from an increasingly better stocked repair-bay- to Breakdown's glossy, vibrant, new paint job when their perfectly civilised morning was ruined by Starscream's arrival. The second Ratchet spied the pair of white wings coming through the doorway, perked high and pointing straight up towards the ceiling, a part of him withered away.

The part was *joy*, and it wasn't likely to return anytime soon in this seeker's presence.

Breakdown, stood in the centre of the repair-bay with his legs shoulder-width apart and his arms held out either side of him to allow Ratchet better access, looked rather more alarmed than exasperated with his sudden appearance.

"Don't move," Ratchet snapped when Breakdown twitched as Starscream approached.

Starscream began to circle Breakdown, looking him up and down, one dark, elegant brow arched condescendingly,

Ratchet ignored his presence as best he could as he worked on spraying the last of Breakdown's armour, but he couldn't stop himself from finding some amusement in the stiff, alarmed way Breakdown was trying to guard himself from the prowling seeker without physically moving. Ratchet wondered what the poor mech imagined Starscream was going to do to him.

"My, my, Breakdown," the seeker began to drawl. "Treating yourself to new a paint job are we?" He stopped directly behind Breakdown, where the Stunticon wouldn't be able to see him.

"And you chose to stick with the same ambitious colour combinations, I see," Starscream continued. "I do hope Knock Out is fonder of that faded, off-white than I am."

Knock Out, Ratchet had to assume, was the mech Breakdown was fond of. The Stunticon dropped his helm and glared at the floor.

Starscream's teasing was fairly gentle by Decepticon standards, but the seeker was still a mean bully. Ratchet didn't tolerate it in his med-bay on the *Ark*, so he certainly wasn't going to let it slide here.

He finished doing Breakdown's legs, stood up, and sprayed the sealant can right at Starscream's smug face. The seeker flinched back and hissed like a cyber-bat exposed to the daylight.

"Oh, sorry Starscream, I didn't see you there," Ratchet claimed. Then sprayed the sealant at him again, half hoping it would be enough to make him leave.

"Stop!" Starscream screeched, flapping his hands to escape the chemical.

"What do you want now, you little creep?" Ratchet took enough pity on him to put the sealant aside, gesturing to Breakdown for him to hold his position a little longer to allow the sealant to set.

"You haven't broken *Skywarp's* cockpit now too?"

Starscream was rubbing sealant from his face angrily. It left odd streams down his dark facial derma, giving him a look much alike that of a human whose mascara had run. "It's not *Skywarp* *you* have to worry about," he snarked threateningly.

Breakdown shifted, "Hey, you can't threaten a medic-"

"You stay out of this," Starscream snapped.

"I thought I told you to stand still," Ratchet admonished Breakdown. The Stunticon looked between him and Starscream with clear concern. "Oh, don't worry about him," Ratchet reassured. "I can handle Starscream."

"*Handle* me, can you?" Starscream scoffed loudly. "You can't even handle *Sunstorm*-"

"Neither can you, Screamer," Breakdown muttered.

Starscream had more patience for sass from Autobot prisoners than he did his own comrades it seemed. As he took a threatening step towards him. Breakdown, ordered several times not to move, stared in frozen horror at his approach.

"Alright, I think you're set," Ratchet hurried him along quickly, deciding smudged sealant would look better on him than Starscream's claws marks. "Go on, quickly, and keep out of the flooded areas on the lower decks. You know what salt water does to your finish."

Starscream glared after the escaping mech, lips curling distastefully,

"You've making allies out of the wrong mecha here," Starscream sneered, settling back into semi-calmness. "Breakdown? *Skywarp*? I don't know what you hope to get out of them."

"Tolerable company, until I can finally get out of here. Which is more than what I can get out of *most* of you," Ratchet sent Starscream a pointed look.

Starscream sniffed, "Perhaps you should worry less about making your stay with us tolerable and more about how you're going to get out of here before *Megatron* feels your uses run out."

Ratchet wanted to laugh, "Before *Megatron* feels my uses run out? I don't believe for a second I'm still here at his behest." He looked into Starscream's narrowed optics challengingly. "If it were up to him, he would have traded me back to Optimus the second he was offered an exchange. Any exchange."

Starscream said nothing. His lips had pressed into hard thin line.

"So what *am* I still here for?" Ratchet prodded. "You must have gotten offers from the Autobots. By now they'll be getting desperate, worried about me. I know what Optimus is like. He doesn't give up easily-"

"His sentimentality is a weakness," Starscream spat. "The joy it brings us to watch him squirm on the comm console far outweighs anything he can offer us-"

"No it doesn't," Ratchet snapped, hurt at the thought of Optimus worrying over him. "Not with your fuel shortages the way they are-"

"There are other ways to procure fuel than to rely on the pity of Autobots," Starscream argued. "I'd

sooner suck crude oil out of a hole in the ground than accept their charity."

Which was a lie. Megatron had swapped prisoners for cubes dozens of times in the past and since Starscream was not yet deactivated by fuel deprivation, he would have drunk from those stockpiles himself. And likely would in future.

Something about his confidence in claiming to not need Autobots resources in the near future worried Ratchet though.

A dread began to settle in his tank. "You're planning another raid."

"...I didn't say that," Starscream said carefully.

"You didn't need to," Ratchet growled. "Is that why these reinforcements are coming in?"

"Who told you reinforcements were-?"

"The whole base knows, it's hardly a secret. How stupid do you think I am? You thought I couldn't put two and two together?! You think dragging more mechs into your flawed 'smash and grabs' is going to make them anymore likely to be successful?! The energon you steal barely covers what you lose in damages, and if you think for one second that I'm going to let you-"

"*Let me?*" Starscream's optics were bright pink with viscous amusement. "You appear to have forgotten your *predicament*, medic. There's no one here that will take your orders."

"I don't give orders. I give advice," Ratchet argued confidently. "And seeing as your approval rating around here is at a rock bottom, I don't think I really need to go into which of us is more likely to be listened to."

"I told you to pick your allies more wisely," Starscream began. "You think that just because you've made friends out of a few idiots that have decided to respect and listen to your Autobot drivel, all because you use *big* words and kiss their *boo-boos*, that you can make a difference to their sense of morality? They don't *care* about humans. And they may be too stupid to know the difference between right and wrong, but they're not so dense that they don't know that listening to *you* would mean going hungry again."

Ratchet tapped his fingers against his chin thoughtfully. "What's the average intelligence of this faction?"

Starscream smirked smugly, "Low. I can only bring it up so high, and even then, I'm an outlier-"

"Well if you're the only smart mech around I'd say the idiots that like and respect me outnumber you and your matchless intelligence a fair bit," Ratchet tucked his thumbs into his hip seams and smiled. "Maybe you should think about that, when planning this next raid."

Starscream was rarely silent for long, but he was then, turning away from Ratchet to retreat into his own calculative mind. Whatever statistics he was running they weren't good news to him. His frown deepened.

"There is no raid," he came back with, in a sweet, innocent, and utterly unconvincing tone. It was worse than when he'd tried to tell Ratchet he wasn't trying to spark himself.

"Then why the extra Cons?"

"Why, because *you're* here of course," Starscream's wings fluttered charismatically.

Ratchet envied Starscream's chameleon-like ability to turn previously sharp, intimidating, attributes into such an appealing aesthetic. He was unnaturally pretty, and Ratchet supposed that was how he was always getting out of trouble.

"This faction is long overdue antiviral upgrades," Starscream explained. "And what with this being an alien planet-"

Ratchet completely forgot what Starscream was clearly trying to steer him away from. Concern overrode secondary issues, "You didn't upgrade your antivirus after waking up!?"

"How could we? Hook doesn't have the software, and these mecha coming via Cybertron have been jumping between all those off-world colonies, Primus only knows what they've picked up."

Ratchet cursed. He had performed crew wide upgrades on Earth before, but he had had help from an additional medic in the form of First Aid, and most of his patients were at least semi-willing to sit through it. They only ever really had trouble with Ironhide...

Not only did Ratchet somehow have to round up every Decepticon (and these new-comers arriving his evening) and have them all sitting still long enough for him hook up to them and upload the upgrade, but he was going to have to put himself into vulnerable position to do so.

He could find *anything* in the software of some of these Cons.

He dismissed the possible repercussions. He was a medic and this was his duty.

And since Starscream was still with him, blathering on about the dangers of unknown virus's and how quickly they could spread through the ranks, Ratchet decided to get a head-start on things. He unspooled his cable, grabbed one of Starscream's gesticulating arms, popped open the access panel on the seeker's wrist, and jabbed the sharp pin at the end of his cable into Starscream's port, ignoring the screech of shock it drew from the seeker.

Ratchet uploaded an upgraded antivirus, cleaned up some of the messy code, and disconnected from the seeker.

Starscream glared at him hatefully, rubbing at his arm like it was sore. "A little *warning* would have been nice," he muttered through gritted denta.

Ratchet was unashamed. "Warnings only give you time to resist the connection. It's quicker this way."

"Well, just be careful," Starscream warned, and deciding to cut his losses, made his way to the door. "Not everyone is going to react so calmly to being *stabbed with a pin*."

"Is that concern I'm hearing? Starscream, I'm *honoured*."

"Concern, yes. For you, *no*," Starscream stopped before the doors, thinking about something for a moment. When he turned back to Ratchet, his smile was wide and smug. "Just so you know ...*Megatron* has a phobia over this sort of thing-"

"Of antivirus upgrades?" Ratchet snorted.

"Not exactly," Starscream cooed deviously. "But of needles, pins, pointing things used for stabbing, you know."

Ratchet hoped to Primus there hadn't been an innuendo in there. "So?"

"So, when it's his turn, be gentle," Starscream pressed the door access panel. "Or use the restraints on the med-berth. Whichever's quickest."

Ratchet never thought he'd take Starscream's advice on anything, but he supposed he was going to have to this time.

Immunisation Day

Ratchet was no stranger to how effective military operations were organised -he had lived with Prowl for a great many years now. He couldn't imagine adding a medical element to the situation would complicate matters too much, and he borrowed Breakdown (who was both one of the few rare accommodating Decepticons, *and* in desperate need of a distraction) so he would have someone familiar with both the terrain and the targets to assist him in the planning.

After all, he couldn't very well wander about the halls with his data-cable primed, leaping on any unsuspecting Cons that came his way. It would cause a panic. A few of them might flee. *Sunstorm* could launch a counter offence.

Together they drew up a wonky but passable blueprint of the Decepticon base on the large screen inside the war chambers, Breakdown having snuck Ratchet inside the highly classified area after making sure the coast was clear. His nerves over Knock Out's eminent arrival became second to his terror that they'd be discovered.

"We have to be quick," Breakdown wrung his big hands together and shot worried glances at the door. It was locked, but from Ratchet's understanding High Command had overrides to every door. "Before someone comes back this way-"

"Why would they come back this way? No one's planning anything, are they?" Ratchet raised his brow at Breakdown, Starscream's evasive manipulations still lingering in the back of his mind. They were definitely up to something, but demanding an answer wasn't going to get him anywhere. He'd need to apply a little subtly, prod at the less guarded of his captors.

Unfortunately, Breakdown wasn't going to be one of them.

"...No," Breakdown said after a delayed pause.

He was a bad liar. Most Decepticons were. Made their moniker rather ironic.

"Alright," Ratchet dismissed it for now. The sooner he inoculated the entire faction the sooner he could deal with the new arrivals, and get to the bottom of the reason behind their jolly little trip to Earth.

He picked up a light-pen and circulated the 'Starscream Cages' Breakdown had revealed to him. "We've only five electro-cages, so we'll reserve them for the worst patients. Megatron-"

"Starscream Cages don't work on Megatron."

Ratchet straightened up and set his hands on his hips, "What do you mean they 'don't work'? Has he learned to phase now?"

"No, he can wirelessly deactivate them," Breakdown smirked like that should have been obvious. Ratchet did not like this sudden increase in sass from him.

"Well we have to figure out someway to pin him down. Primus knows I can't hold him."

"I can."

Ratchet didn't want to shatter Breakdown's gross overconfidence, but that was a laughable claim.

"Menasor could, yes," Ratchet allowed with a careful nod. "But you're too big to combine down here. And from what I hear, you're not very good at taking orders when you and your gestalt all get together."

Breakdown pulled an unhappy face.

"Might be easier to sneak up on him," Ratchet murmured, stroking his chin. "Preferably when he's fusion-cannon free."

With visions of a defensive Megatron blasting his helm clean off his shoulders in retaliation for a harmless little prick, Ratchet decided to set the Megatron-Problem aside for now.

There were far less Trypanophobic Decepticons than there were Autobots (really only Megatron and Frenzy -the latter of which was known for abusing his likeness to Rumble to trick medics into giving his poor twin two lots of antivirus upgrades. So that was another problem to deal with.)

And though there were less mecha openly terrified by the idea of being stabbed by the medic around the Decepticon base than there were on the Ark, it didn't mean his remaining patients were going to be any more cooperative.

Sunstorm objected to medical intervention on principle -though Ratchet wasn't entirely sure he even *could* hook up to that seeker in the first place, lest he risk bursting into flame- and Primus only knew who else he had brainwashed with his rhetoric.

The Conehead's had been spending a lot of time with him (allegedly just to annoy Starscream) but their penchant for flying into things head first meant they were at risk of lower cognitive function and more likely to believe the utter slag Sunstorm was shovelling.

"We can fit three seeker's into one Starscream cage, can't we?" Ratchet pondered, tapping the light-pen against his chin.

Breakdown cracked his knuckles with a nod, mouth lifting at one corner, "I'm sure I can manage it."

"Good boy," Ratchet circled the electro-cage outside the flight barracks. "Right, we'll start with the biggest problems and work our way down."

And to kick off the fun with perfect timing, the lock on the war chambers deactivated and the door slid open.

Breakdown looked like he was about to have a spark-attack, and half ducked behind the table like he might be able to hide from whoever had caught them in the act. But the doorway was empty. Breakdown straightened with a frown.

Ratchet rounded the table and his gaze dropped to the bottom of the doorway. Rumble and Frenzy had poked their helms around the bulkhead, their identical grins wide and devilish. "Watcha up to?"

Breakdown opened his mouth, "We were figuring out how to trap the-"

"You two want to see this?" Ratchet interrupted hastily, before Breakdown ruined his best chance at getting an unsuspecting Frenzy within arms length.

The twins rushed over, boosting themselves up into the table. Ratchet subtly moved to stand behind Frenzy as the twins kneeled atop the map, frowning as they tried to make sense of it. "What

are you planning?"

Breakdown shifted uncomfortably, looking between them and Ratchet. "Maybe we should get Soundwave before, you know..."

Ratchet ignored him, unspooling his cable and eyeing the access port on Frenzy's shoulder, "We're trying to figure out how to ambush Megatron," he answered honestly.

The twins looked to Breakdown in disbelief, and in their moment of distraction, Ratchet struck, jabbing the pin of his cable into Frenzy when he was facing the other way. The connection was instant, but so was the reaction. And in hindsight, Ratchet probably *should* have asked for Soundwave's help.

Frenzy's normally gruff, arrogant voice pitched up in a shrill scream as he fell onto his side, looking over at his arm like he wished it was no longer a part of his frame. Ratchet raised a hand to calm him, but by then his brother was rushing to his defence, piledriver fists at the ready.

Ratchet was still connected to Frenzy and unable to go anywhere, and stared wide-optic'd at the fists flying for his face. He cringed, bracing for impact - when Breakdown came out of nowhere with a diving tackle and swept the attacking cassette up, taking Rumble's mighty punch square in the chest plate.

Ratchet watched them clatter to the floor together as he finished uploading the new antivirus into Frenzy. He disconnected as soon as he could and Frenzy rolled away from him across the table with an explosive curse, his expression set in betrayal.

Ratchet looked between Breakdown and Rumble on the floor, and Frenzy now cowering under the table.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Breakdown, now sporting an ugly dent in the centre of his chest, looked ready to argue that.

Ratchet thought it in his best interests to sincerely apologise to Soundwave when he was giving the mech -and his remaining cassettes- their own upgrades. Frenzy had retreated into the tape-deck's chest but Ratchet assumed he could hear and decided that meant he wouldn't have to make a second apology to him as well.

But in his defence, he *had* gotten the job done.

Soundwave said nothing on the matter, but his cold stoic demeanour told Ratchet he wasn't too happy with his methods.

"He'll be fine," Ratchet reassured himself as much as he did Breakdown. "I sure I didn't exacerbate his phobia."

Breakdown didn't look particularly impressed. "If you're going to go and do that Megatron now, I want to be reassigned off guard duty. Skywarp can be your minder. At least he'll be able to teleport to safety when Megatron flips the frag out."

"He's not going to flip out," Ratchet muttered. "He's going to endure it stoically like the big brave

mech he is."

Breakdown's frown deepened.

"Well, do you have any bright ideas?"

"Do you have to inoculate him?" Breakdown muttered grumpily. "Seems like the easy thing to do is leave him alone."

Ratchet would just love to have that sort of mindset. How much easier his life would be...

"And when he gets another virus?" He queried.

"What do you care?"

Ratchet opened his mouth to argue that *of course* he cared. Then remembered the patient they were discussing, and subtly switched his own vocaliser off before he could say anything incriminating.

"...I don't." He said, once he'd gotten his priorities back in order. "But I have to at least try."

"Maybe we should ask Starscream."

"Why? So he can point and laugh?"

Breakdown shrugged, "Well he's gotta kinda care about Megatron, right? Even just a little."

Ratchet stared.

"Maybe he'll help for Megatron's sake," Breakdown finished.

It took Ratchet a second to reset his own spinning processor. "I - look, whatever Starscream's feelings are towards ...anyone, he's not a trustworthy partner to have."

"He fixed the tools," Breakdown reminded him.

"What are you?" Ratchet demanded, "his number one fan?"

"I'm just saying you could use him as a distraction to get close. And then once Megatron realises you've stabbed him with the pin he'll be less likely to fire his fusion cannon if Starscream's between you and him."

"Less likely?" Ratchet doubted it. Starscream had the sort of face no one could resist shooting at.

"Alright," he relented. "But what's to say he'll even agree?"

And then Breakdown stunned him with unexpected insightfulness into the psyche of Starscream. "He likes being needed,"

Breakdown left him with Starscream -who was utterly disgusted at the idea of being put on prisoner guard duty- and went to try and fix the dent Rumble had put into his chest plate in time for Knock Out's arrival.

Starscream tutted, shaking his head as he watched him go, "He hasn't a chance in the Pit."

Ratchet scowled, "No wonder Unicron spat you out, you bitter hunk of debris."

Starscream's optics sparked, "I'm merely being honest. Knock Out is so far out of his league, it's laughable. He's setting himself up for spark-break."

"Is that why you set your standards so low?" Ratchet asked as they walked, heading for the throne room, where Megatron spent the better part of his daytime hours brooding.

"You're insulting Megatron, not me, so I'm not going to rise to your inane little comments," Starscream told him snobbishly, nose in the air. "And as *beneath me* as Tarnish coding may be, do remember that Megatron could snap you in two with just his pinky, so let *me* do the talking and wait for my que."

"You've already gotten this all planned out?"

"I have a lot of unused tactics at my disposal," Starscream smiled, "I'm going to hurt him, just a little bit, and you're to get close enough to fix the damage. And when I have him suitably distracted-"

"A distractions not going to stop him from whipping around and punching me through the bulkhead."

"*My* distraction will. Trust me."

Ratchet scoffed, "I'd rather not."

They had arrived at the throne room so the bickering had to stop there. Starscream strode in first, and wandering in behind him Ratchet took note of how the seeker's body-language changed in Megatron's presence. Everything seemed to *lift*. Chin up, optics brighter, wings higher, chest puffed up. He made himself bigger and taller. Reminiscent of a bizarre sort of threat display.

Past Starscream, Megatron was a heap of slumped, scowling metal over his throne.

Ratchet spotted a little twitch at the corner of his mouth at Starscream's entry, but the second Megatron spied Ratchet entering after the seeker, it was gone. Still, however fleeting it had been, Ratchet had seen it, and committed it to his memory banks.

He ignored the little tinge of feeling it was trying to inspire in him. He refused to be charmed by the dysfunctional relationship of the two worst people he had ever known. If copious amounts of sex and assassination attempts could even be *called* a relationship.

"You brought the medic," Megatron growled, sounding peeved.

"The medic has a designation." Ratchet grumbled wearily.

He was ignored, and so stepped subtly to the side and out of the way as Starscream began to ramble on to his leader about some flight drills he wanted to propose. It weirded Ratchet out when he casually took a seat on the armrest of the throne to speak to Megatron.

Ratchet wrinkled his nose when he watched Megatron absently place his hand on Starscream's knee, patting it fondly as he listened. He wanted to look away, but he was waiting for this signal from Starscream.

The situation deteriorated further for Ratchet when Starscream upped the intimacy. He leaned in, legs crossing atop one another and tilting towards Megatron so his entire frame was angled

seductively.

Starscream continued to prattle on about Ramjet being too slow to take point in his own trine but Ratchet could tell Megatron was no longer hearing any of it. A processor was *not* functioning behind those dimmed, blank optics of his. His gaze was locked onto Starscream's waist; at perfect eye level with it. All Starscream needed to do was lean in an inch or so more and Megatron would be shamelessly nuzzling his chassis.

Ratchet began to suspect this wasn't a plot to help him inoculate Megatron at all, and Starscream had actually brought him here to torment him.

Though it was a small wonder to him that Starscream hadn't yet managed to effectively usurp command of the Decepticons. Megatron didn't seem to have any viable defence against *these* methods.

Starscream lifted a hand to Megatron's head and stroked a thumb over his cheek. If Ratchet had thought the warlord had softened before, he was now positively melting under Starscream's touch. It was clearly as low as the seeker was ever going to get Megatron's guard, because that was when he decided to strike; the fingers fondly stroking Megatron's helm suddenly unsheathed deadly six-inch claws.

Screech, and Megatron snapped out of his trance with a hiss of air past teeth, a hand flying up to cup his bleeding cheek. Starscream immediately gasped at his 'clumsiness', and Ratchet, seeing what this had been about, made his way over.

"I told you I'd clip those claws off if you didn't keep them to yourself," Ratchet threatened Starscream -and it wasn't just for show. He meant it to.

"I like the claws," Megatron murmured, still a little dazed from Starscream's hypnotic seductions.

Ratchet grabbed his big ugly head and forced him to look away from the seeker -a difficult feat indeed when Starscream was still sat on the arm of the throne, looking so very lovely. Ratchet held the warlord's jaw and studied the damage Starscream had caused. One neat cut, an easy patch. He would deal with it later.

Instead of transforming his hand into a welder, he slyly unspooled his data-cable, glancing down at the arm Megatron had resting on the throne's arm, the access port sitting there, defenceless.

Megatron's optics were on Starscream again anyway, and Starscream made sure to keep it that way, bringing his wings forward to sway them softly.

"What are you playing at?" Megatron asked him with warm, familiar suspicion. "Throwing yourself at me during shift hours? Those blasted baffles haven't glitched your libido, have they?" Megatron glanced at Ratchet for an answer, forcing him to swiftly hide the cable behind his back.

Starscream's expression soured. He appeared to forget about distracting his leader with charm.

"I thought we had a deal, Megatron," he snapped, stealing his leader's attention away again, allowing Ratchet to get back to unspooling the cable. "That we weren't to talk about each other's intimate problems in front of company?"

His optics flicked to Ratchet and saw he had the cable ready, pin pointed. "Unless you'd like me to tell Ratchet here about your habit of falling into recharge on top of me when we're in the middle of-"

Ratchet did *not* want to hear that. So much so, that he chose to risk deactivation instead, and flicked open the access port on Megatron's arm and jammed in.

Then several things happened very quickly, but to Ratchet -who was viewing the unfolding scene as if it could very well be his last- saw it happen in slow motion.

Megatron seized up, his armour clamping down and his optics blowing so brightly they could have burst. Ratchet held onto his forearm with both hands tight to keep him from wrenching himself free, but he wouldn't be strong enough if Megatron really fought against him. Starscream dropped off the armrest and into Megatron's lap heavily, stopping him from leaping up in a panic by wrapping himself around him, adding his strength to Ratchet's so together they could hold Megatron's arm in place.

Ratchet began to sort through code as fast as his software allowed him, feeling the tremble of Megatron's frame under his palms. He looked up, and Megatron had hidden his face against Starscream's neck. He squeezing the seeker in an embrace with his free arm, so tightly that Ratchet could see Starscream's wing had been bent out of shape under the pressure. His ventilations were ragged and loud, his massive hands clenched into tight fists.

As soon as he was able, Ratchet withdrew and shut the panel, and took three self-preserving steps back.

Megatron didn't move. His ventilations filled the silent room.

Starscream shooed him angrily. "Get out!"

Ratchet thought that was rather good advice, and left at a quick run-skip, telling himself it was merely his overactive imagination when his audials picked up the sounds of Starscream's normally oily, sly voice soft with murmured comforts.

Megatron's reaction stayed with Ratchet. He had expected shouting and prideful bluster -the standard defence of a mech who didn't want to admit they were frightened. Megatron's reaction had been something more than that though.

"-still in there Ratch'?"

A pair of knuckle rapped against the top of his head.

Ratchet blinked himself out of his stupor and slapped Breakdown away lightly, "What now?"

"I said, I got out the dent," Breakdown turned sideways on so Ratchet could see his restored chest plate -not quite as good as new but certainly better than after Rumble's pile-driver had hammered into it. "It look okay?"

Ideally Ratchet would have liked to have removed it and hammered it back into shape properly, when his free time wasn't so taken up with chasing after unruly needle-dodgers. But he wasn't going to say so to Breakdown right before he was due to meet the proclaimed love of his life.

Who, Ratchet had learned off a disenfranchised and arguably jealous Drag Strip, he had never actually met in person. Knock Out was often tasked with passing information from his unit to the Decepticon Earth crew via comm console, and Breakdown had quickly made a habit of

volunteering for Comms duties -and was subsequently constantly in trouble with Soundwave for hogging the frequency channels and making it impossible for Shockwave to get through. It bizarrely reminded Ratchet of Carly's feud with her mother over their home phone line.

Ratchet found himself hoping against all odds that this Knock Out was part of the small minority of Decepticons that were 'okay' actually. Something told him Breakdown wouldn't fall for a jerk -he was a little rough around the edges but he had a good spark- so maybe he was worrying over nothing.

"If you spend much longer preening you'll turn into Starscream," Ratchet warned him. "You look great."

Breakdown fingered the little cracks of silver on the chestplate where the dent had damaged the paint, "You don't think he'll notice?"

"If he does, he'll swoon over your battle scars," Ratchet muttered, sifting through the data-pads and frantically crossing off the designations of the Decepticons they's so far managed to inoculate. He dragged the light-pen over Skywarp's name with much more force than necessary, still smarting over that idiots decision to turn his antivirus update into a 'fun' game of catch the teleporter.

"How long have we got before things get even more cramped down here?" He asked, dreading the arrival of more Decepticons

Breakdown shrugged, "No one tells me anything."

"Can you find out?" Ratchet asked impatiently.

"From who?"

Hopeless. Ratchet tossed the light-pen down and straightened up, bracing his hands against the small of his back and arching back until he heard a crack and felt the release of pressure.

"Alright. It's just the Conehead's now," he sighed. "We're not going to bother with Sunstorm. I'm tired enough as it is so I'm not adding a conversation with him into the mix. My processor would explode, and then what would you all do..."

"What if he gets sick?" Breakdown interrupted his muttering.

"He won't get sick," Ratchet shook his head, "No one can get close enough to infect him with anything in the first place."

Breakdown's face softened with sympathy, "Huh. That must suck."

Ratchet paused. "...I'm sure he's used to it."

He was about to hand over a the bag of energon goodies -stolen from Megatron's (and Starscream's) quarters by an apologetic Skywarp to make up for his earlier shenanigans- and explain to him how they were going to use them as bait for the last of the seeker, like how Tower mechs used to use raw energon to lure turbo foxes into traps on the hunt- when Breakdown's wrist-comm alert-light fluttered.

"Breakdown," he answered.

"*Your boyfriend's here,*" Motormaster's gruff but teasing voice came through the speaker.

All the colour drained from Breakdown's face. He looked to Ratchet, terror etched into his every feature.

Ratchet was annoyed at now charmed he was by the utterly helpless display.

"Can I-?"

"Go?" Ratchet folded his arms, "Why are you asking me? I'm not your boss? Or was I elected supreme Decepticon leader in the last few hours? Megatron didn't *like* the hook-up, but it didn't kill him-

"But we haven't finished?" Breakdown was protesting with his words, but his legs were already walking him backwards out the door. "The Conehead's-?"

"I'll get to them," Ratchet flapped a hand. "But since you're making yourself part of the greeting party make sure they all know to stop by the repair-bay. They should really get a once over before they're mixed in with the rest of my patients."

Breakdown gave a nod and stepped out, but his head popped around the doorway again the next second, smirking, "*Your* patients?"

Ratchet snatched up the light-pen and threw it at him, not caring at all if it messed up his face for his fancy new boyfriend.

He was never left in peace for long. It was mere minutes before someone came storming Into his repair bay again.

Starscream - as if Ratchet hadn't seen enough of him today. He was still sporting the bent wing from Megatron's earlier ...episode, and had clearly come to get it straightened out now that the *guests* had arrived.

"-using my slagging wing as a stress ball right before the reinforcements arrived just so I would look stupid. If Knock Out sees this, or *worse*, Deadlo-

"Reinforcements for what?" Ratchet interrupted loudly.

"For your 'surprise party'," Starscream gave him a dull look, "You're getting awfully comfortable here, medic, and I don't like it."

He sat on the med-berth with a heavy *thunk* that seemed to shake the walls. "Just fix it quickly before they all come wandering down here for their checkups."

"How many are there?" Ratchet sighed, smacking the outside of Starscream thigh lightly so he'd lift them onto the berth. "Roll over-

Starscream blew air past his lips, "Just bend it back-

"*Roll over*, or I'll use the restraints," Ratchet warned.

Starscream blinked at him, then rolled his optics and scoffed to hide his intimidation. "I could have you thrown in the brig," he muttered quietly.

Ratchet pressed a hand to the centre of his back to make sure he was flat on his front. "You mean I could spend a few days below deck, alone in the peace and quiet?" Ratchet asked. "What a punishment that would be."

He used a clamp to start straightening out the wing. It wasn't a severe bend so the plating hadn't been weakened, he just had to do it carefully and gradually. To Starscream it would have felt like someone was *stretching* his wing. His discomfort was showing in the way his fingers gripped the edge of the med-berth. Ratchet massaged the lowest hinge of his wings, which was both a pressure point and bundle of sensors. There was a hiss of released pressure as Starscream loosened up a little.

"Was anything else damaged?" Ratchet asked.

Starscream hummed distantly (perhaps he was applying a little *too* much pressure to the wing hinge) and blinked slow, like a lizard. "Huh?"

"*Megatron*," Ratchet said impatiently. "Did he damage anything else when he ...when you were comforting him?"

That brought Starscream around a little. His optics narrowed. "I wasn't comforting him, I was holding him down for you."

"Compassion isn't a bad thing, Starscream," he glanced down at the seekers angry pout. "Is he alright?"

"Who?"

"*Megatron*,"

"*I'm* the one who's damaged!" Starscream reminded him. "Look at my wing! What's this sudden concern for him?!"

"You knew he was going to react like that. Has he told you if anyone's ever-"

Starscream pushed himself up, "Remove the clamp, the wing is straight enough."

"You're being evasive," Ratchet snapped, undoing the clamp roughly, making Starscream wince.

"No," he pointed a sharp claw, "*you* are being *invasive*. Everyone's entitled to their little glitches, *Megatron's* just happens to be a phobia of pointy things."

Ratchet looked between the extended claw and Starscream. "He lets *you* near him."

Starscream swung his legs off the repair berth, "Whatever you think, keep it to yourself. *Megatron's* past is not up for discussion."

It suddenly struck Ratchet like an incoming shuttle train. Guilt weighed down his spark. "Look, Starscream, I'm not a psychiatrist but I can help-"

"Psychiatry?!" Starscream repeated in horror. "We're Decepticons. We don't talk about our problems, we hit them-"

"Yes, I've noticed," Ratchet had to fight to keep his tone even. "*Megatron* goes about *hitting things* quite a bit, doesn't he?"

Starscream glared at him hatefully.

"This isn't just a once in a decade problem for when his antivirus needs upgrades. This isn't going to *go away*, Starscream," Ratchet rubbed a hand over his face, "If you loved him, you'd let me help."

"Disgusting." Starscream backed away like what he was saying could be contagious, his lip curled in revulsion, "I don't love anything."

"You're a dirty, loved up liar!" Ratchet called after him, watched him stomp from the repair-bay in a huff.

Party Pooper

It was quiet. Too quiet.

For as long as Ratchet had known him, Prowl had always had some sort of sixth sense -a Mischief Detector almost- that meant he always knew when someone was up to no good. He'd be sat in the Tactical Centre, frowning at intel reports, when out of seemingly nowhere his door wings would stiffen and his optics glazed over, before he stood up without a word and marched off in the direction of the Rec Room to, without fail, suck the joy out of whatever not-so-innocent shenanigans occurring.

Ratchet had never been as impressed or fearful of Prowl's supernatural ability to stomp on fun before it even had the chance to take off as other Autobots, mostly because as an intelligent member of the crew Ratchet knew that there was always *someone* up to something at any given time. It was a statistical surety that whenever Prowl went on the warpath he would catch someone (usually a twin) in the act.

He dismissed it as luck, rather than talent.

That was until just now, as Ratchet had been updating the Decepticons poorly kept, but improving medical records, and realised that he was utterly alone, and had been for some time. No shy knocking at his door, no hysterical Stunticon clutching a tiny cut in their finger, not a single vegetable lodged where it shouldn't have been.

He looked up, taking note of the time on his chrono and realising just how long he had been down here undisturbed, left in peace. And how none of the promised new arrivals had come to put themselves through the ordeal of a checkup with an Autobot.

He supposed it was his own fault for trusting Breakdown to enforce his wishes. The stupid mech was probably so entranced with his new beau he'd forgotten everything else in the world.

And with that thought, Ratchet felt a surge of irrepressible responsibility to ensure Breakdown wasn't getting himself into trouble. Or worse, being *led* into trouble by this flashy minx of a sports car. That *Starscream* appeared to put stock in this Knock Out's opinion couldn't be a good sign.

He left the repair-bay and headed in the opposite direction of the Crew Quarters and Mess Hall, wandering into so far unexplored territory. The long corridors stretched out into darkness, with many twists and side passages left unlit to preserve fuel. Rather than wander into a dead end to be eaten by whatever space monsters may have stowed away aboard the ship when it had crashed, Ratchet stuck to the lit corridors, following the purple plated hallways until his audials picked up the sounds of life.

He stopped walking and could feel the vibrations of movement below his pedes. Revving engines, laughter, a shrill scream, a crash and a chorus of groans- he knew those noises well, and was flung back four million years to his time at the academy -parties in his dorm, breaking into the physics department to throw laser-show keggers, getting kicked out of an oil bar and threatened with security after dancing on the tables.

Those had been the days.

Days long since past. He was no longer the legendary Party Ambulance. He had been Prowlified by the war. Now, he was the Party Pooper. And damn proud of it.

What could only be a 'welcoming party' was being thrown on the basement deck, and as Ratchet descended the stairs he approached the merry making with caution. He could be reassured that no one was overcharged thanks to the fuel shortage, but there were plenty other ways for Decepticons to overexcite themselves. They fought among themselves enough when they were calm and unstimulated as it was.

The gathering was taking place in Workstations 1 and 2 and the length corridor between it, completely blocking access to Engineering. They'd simply have to hope nothing overheated or malfunctioned in there and blew them all to pit, but with Decepticon luck being what is it...

All the usual suspects were present. Ratchet craned his neck to see over the tall shoulders of Decepticon brawlers and the arches of perky wings, but he couldn't catch more of a glimpse of Skywarp than just the audial popping 'crack' of his warp drive ripping a hole through the dimensions of time and space, and a flash of purple lighting up the nearby walls. There were several unfamiliar faces too, mostly youthful, unscarred automobiles, that looked over at him with resentment as he stood before the mass of mechs, all until a 'crack' sounded right in his audial and-

"Ratchet the Hatchet!" Skywarp flung an arm around his neck, the tight grip cutting off Ratchet's air intake and half choking him to death. Skywarp's breath was hot and humid against the side of his face as the seeker laughed, "You came!"

"Get off!" Ratchet found the pressure point in Skywarp's wrist and jabbed it. With a confused grunt Skywarp released him, and looked at his arm in confusion.

"Ow."

"What is going on down here?!"

Skywarp lifted his arms overhead with flourish, "Welcoming party! Look, we got balloons."

Ratchet followed his gesture towards the ceiling, which was decorated with plastic shopping bags of various faded colours, fished straight out of the ocean, most still tangled in seaweed. One of them shifted and Ratchet spied a small crab dangling off the bottom of one by it's claw, just before it dropped into the sea of mechs.

"-*Hell is that?!'*" Someone shrieked.

"Warp!" An out of breath Thundercracker appeared before them then, turning sideways to squeeze out of the crowd squashed into the too-small corridor. "I told you not to leave me alone with Astrotrain!"

Skywarp flapped an unbothered hand, "Oh chill *out*, TC, he only wants a threesome."

"Yeah, with him and Blitzwing! They could kill me!" Thundercracker's distraught face turned a shade of purple Ratchet had never witnessed before. Curious at the medical implications, Ratchet leaned in to study him.

Thundercracker veered away, hands out defensively, "I'm leaving, my personal space has been invaded enough for one day."

Skywarp's jovial expression collapsed as he followed Thundercracker in the direction of the stairs, "But *we're* still on for this evening, right? TC? Sweetspark?!"

Ratchet followed their progress until movement in his peripheral vision stole his attention. He glanced up just in time to see Slipstream draw back a fist and punch a navy and purple mech clean

in the face, completely concaving his nasal ridge in, before tugging a shocked Nova Storm against her side and strolling off with her in a huff.

Ratchet took a concerned step towards the damaged party, but the flat-nosed mech managed to wobble back to his feet unassisted. Ratchet waved a hand. He'd worry about that later.

He looked around for someone with authority, or even just the illusion of it, but High Command were suspiciously absent. Megatron - he hadn't expected to see again today anyway, and perhaps Starscream had taken his advice and was with his leader in a personal rather than professional capacity. But Soundwave did not strike him as the sensible sort of mech to be absent when so many unsupervised morons were running amuck on the basement level. Right next to Engineering. Where *one* stray shot could blow them all to Pit.

He reached out to snag the nearest partier for an explanation, and by pure luck, collared Dirge.

"Yck-!"

"Where are your superiors?" Ratchet demanded, giving him a little shake.

Dirge was either too meek or too tired to squirm out of his grip, and merely looked between him and the fingers in his collar seam with a pathetically defeated expression. "I don't know."

"Starscream?"

Dirge gave a tiny shrug. "He doesn't come to these things anyway. No one likes him."

"So he *knows* you're all down here, vandalising the basement, and he's not using it as an opportunity to tear everyone a new exhaust?" This was beyond suspicious. "And Megatron? Soundwave?"

"They're working on something," Dirge began trying to free himself.

"On what?"

"I don't know!" Dirge's voice was strained, "That's just what Ramjet told me. *I'm* not even supposed to know."

Ratchet released him with a shove, turning on his heel and heading right back towards the staircase. He *knew* they'd been planning something, and of all the times to go through with it at that! With half-starved troops and a psychologically traumatised leadership?!

This was Starscream's doing. Always pushing ahead whatever the consequences. He'd been right about that selfish, conniving harpy from the very start and-!

"Ratch! Ratchet, wait!"

Breakdown, beaming from jaw-hinge to jaw-hinge waved at him as he manoeuvred through the mechs. Ratchet glanced back to tell him that whatever it was, it had to wait - when the shine of ceiling lights reflected across mirror-polished red armour caught his optics. He did a double-take, leaning out around Breakdown's bulk to catch a glimpse of the sleek mech he was dragging along by the hand behind him.

Well. It was clear why Breakdown had been so infatuated.

Knock Out -who else could it have been- was certainly beautiful, but clearly knew it all too well.

He was handsome, with a small (smirking) mouth, petite nose, and big expressive optics. He was built out of streamlined, curved armour plates that gave him the sort of appealing modern shape that had been extremely fashionable just before the war broke out. He was short, coming up to the bottom of Breakdown's chest plate, but was a relatively stocky figure, and there wasn't a *trace* of dirt on him. Finely manicured fingers were clutched in Breakdown's large cumbersome fist.

Breakdown squeezed the hand he held nervously, "There's someone you gotta meet."

Ratchet tore his gaze away from the piece of fine art Breakdown had somehow managed to find (he understood Starscream's scepticism over the relationship now) and frowned at his supposed assistant. "Weren't you supposed to be making sure all these idiots made it to my repair bay for an exam before they started ...*mingling* with the rest of the crew?"

Breakdown's smile faltered. He glanced down at him companion. "Oh yeah, I got distracted-"

Knock Out smiled up at him mischievously, leaning into his side to curl his other hand around his arm.

"I can see that," Ratchet muttered.

"This is Knock Out," Breakdown introduced, optics fixed worshipfully on the sports car, "He's a velocitronian medic-"

"-in training," Knock Out corrected when Ratchet's brow lifted with interest. He had the smooth rolling accent of a colony mech, a quality most found exotic - Breakdown being one of them. The Stunticon seemed to melt a little with every word Knock Out uttered. "The war broke out a few years before I was due to graduate."

"Still more qualified than *that* lot," Ratchet pointed, and Breakdown and Knock Out turned around to see Scrapper and Bonecrusher with vibro-shields attached to the top of their helmets, backed up to opposite ends of the corridor and bent over. As they watched they ran at each other like charging bulls with war cries. There was a loud clang then cheer as they collided.

"So," Knock Out drawled slowly, optics tracking up and down his frame. "You're a defector?"

Ratchet's mood swooped low. He glanced down at the faded Autobot insignia on his chest. "No." He growled out. "A prisoner."

"You don't look much like a prisoner to me, wandering the ship, joining in at parties, insulting your captives without fear of repercussions-"

"Knockie," Breakdown murmured, and the mortifyingly embarrassing state of that nickname was the only thing that stopped Ratchet reaching out and *smudging* the prissy car's pristine finish. "I know he's a Bot, but he's one of the good ones-"

"One of the 'good ones,'" Ratchet repeated. He felt himself growing increasingly annoyed.

Breakdown looked uncomfortable and borderline fearful as he stood between the medic and the *almost* medic, unable to say anything more for fear of making things worse. Ratchet glared heatedly at the arrogant sports car.

Knock Out looked away first, humming disinterestedly.

"When you're finished playing with your pet Autobot, come and find me," Knock Out slipped his hand free of Breakdown's and turned his back on Ratchet. He gave him the sort of over-the-

shoulder glance that was intended to make it's receiver feel small and ugly, and then, like a typically immature, insecure *kid*, pulled Breakdown down by the clavicle seam, leaned over his huge chest plates and laid a loud, long, open mouthed kiss on him.

Ratchet invested himself in the sight of the plastic bags swaying where they were nailed to the ceiling, rolling his optics at the crisp, tank-rolling sounds of French kissing. When the two love-birds finally broke apart, Breakdown laughed goofily. Only then did Ratchet finally deem it safe to turn around again.

Breakdown was still watching the red car walk away.

Rather clapped his hands in front of his face, "Snap out of it!"

Breakdown jumped. Knock Out's attention had left with him flushed cheeks and wide, amazed optics, like a whole new world had just been opened up to him. Ratchet chose to ignore it as best he could.

"Has the code to the War Chambers been changed since we snuck in this morning?" He demanded.

Breakdown was too infatuated and distracted to think to ask why Ratchet would want to know such a thing. "Er, no, they change once and week, or if there's been an intruder."

"Good. Now listen you. If I'm still alive this evening tell your boyfriend I want to see him *first*," he stuck a finger in Breakdown's face so the mech knew he was serious. "And in the mean time, be careful. Primus only knows what he's hiding in those trussed up wires of his."

Breakdown's mouth tilted up at the corners at the mentioned of his true love. He didn't appear to be hearing anything else Ratchet was saying. "Isn't he amazing?"

"He's ...certainly something," Ratchet stepped away, trying to remove himself from the conversation so he could get on with dealing with the real problem upstairs.

Breakdown was nodding to himself, "I'm going to ask him to perform the conjunx ritus with me."

Ratchet froze. He had already turned toward the stairs to leave, but he couldn't ignore Breakdown's airy, boneheaded statement. He pinched the bridge of his nose, turning back to face him. "No. You're not."

"No, I am."

"*Breakdown*," Ratchet hissed through his teeth, his temper rising faster with the urgency of the situation, and how in the Hell the universe always expected him to be in ten places at once. "You just met him."

Breakdown looked at him with great big forlorn optics, "I feel like I've known him my whole life. I love him."

Too bad they weren't serving drinks at this party or Ratchet could have thrown one at his face. "You've only been online a few *months*, Breakdown!"

"What does that matter?" Breakdown was beginning to sound upset, frustrated that Ratchet wasn't jumping for joy at the prospect of him tying himself for eternity to a glamour-car with no notable personality traits beyond being a complete *bitch*. "We're at war, you've gotta ...seize the opportunity, and all that-

"I don't have time for this," Ratchet threw up his hands, "I have to deal another crisis unfolding elsewhere. Can you do me this one favour and *not* marry yourself off to anyone until I get back? We can talk about this later-"

"Promoting more of your Autobot promiscuity about our ranks I see, medic," a superior sounding voice asked.

Ratchet had been so flustered by Breakdown's wedding plans he hadn't noticed the familiar flare of radioactive heat approaching from behind until Sunstorm, the glowing beacon of virtue and pedantry, was already within audial range of their conversation.

The Decepticons filling the vicinity of the hallway looked up at the sound of his voice and identical looks of fear filled the faces of all present as they realised they were now *trapped* in the basement with Primus's deadly gift to all Cybertronians.

Ratchet stumbled back a few steps, HUD notifications advising him to withdraw out of range before the energon in his fuel lines *exploded*. Breakdown saw his shift in attention as an opportunity to escape and bowled down several other mechs in his rush to flee for the sanctity of Engineering. Like a chain reaction it caused a great stampede towards the back of basement. Blast Off was the last to get to safety, tripping over one of the fallen plastic bags and landing on his face. Long Haul, the brave spark, threw out his crane hook and used it to drag him across the decking to safety.

Ratchet watched the last witness's legs disappear around the doorframe to Engineering, and sighed. Once again, he had been left to face Sunstorm alone.

"Hello Sunshine," he greeted.

"My name is *Sunstorm*," the seeker corrected him with a hint of annoyed confusion. "I've heard some troublesome rumours regarding you today."

Who was even talking to Sunstorm for him to hear these rumours?! Ratchet cast an angry glance back at Engineering. A red-winged figure guilty ducked out of sight.

"And *how* have I offended your delicate sensibilities this time?"

"These "antivirus upgrades" of yours-"

"Don't *air quote* it," Ratchet snapped. "It's a legitimate medical practice that has been in use for millennia-"

"There's no need to get angry," Sunstorm said softy, and the pacifying tone he was using was infuriatingly. "I merely came to educate you on the dangers of coding altering practices. Primus designed us with our *own* firewalls-"

"Firewalls don't always work," Ratchet didn't know what he was bothering to try and explain this since there was clearly nothing but fluff and hot air filling Sunstorm's head. "Virus's are forever upgrading themselves and for our software to keep up-"

"It's an unnecessary practice and comes with too many risks," Sunstorm shook his helm. "I was unable to warn most away from your methods before the damage had already been done-"

"How unfortunate," Ratchet muttered sarcastically.

"Certainly for Lord Megatron it was," Sunstorm said casually.

Ratchet's spark pulse could be heard in his audials. It thrummed through him like a beating drum. His hands were curled into fists so tightly, the metal plating creaked. "I won't discuss my patients with you."

"I blame myself," Sunstorm just *kept talking*. "For all your faults I naively believed you had good intentions, that you were simply misinformed and deluded into thinking your unnatural methods were a means to an end, but I *see you* now, taking joy in your enemies fear and discomfort," Sunstorm shook his helm in disapproval. "You're no better than the tormentor who instilled that phobia in Megatron in the first place."

White hot fury burned through Ratchet's chest, an anger no foul words or raging shouts could have effectively conveyed. Had it been anyone else he would have buried his fist in their face. But he needed his hands. And Sunstorm's armour melted dura-steel on contact.

"When I finally leave here," he said quietly, fixing Sunstorm with the most intense, promising stare. "I'm coming back with a gun. And I'm coming back for you."

Sunstorm tilted his head in disbelief. "You're a medic."

"I am," Ratchet took the long route around him to get to the stairs, "So I'll know *exactly* where to aim."

Breakdown had been right. The code had not changed, so Ratchet was free to barge straight into the War Chambers unhindered both by security or his own mounting sense of self-preservation. He could very well be over playing his hand in this and achieving little but the signing of his own death warrant. Entering the lions den could be the worse mistake of his life, but these pointless plots put lives on the line - human, Autobot, and *Decepticon* lives.

He stepped into the darkened room and helms twisted to face him, all the greatest tactical minds of the Decepticons. Starscream, Soundwave, and Onslaught stood around the large oval table, with Shockwave as a projected hologram in it's centre. At the head of the table sat an unresponsive Megatron, who didn't even look up at his entrance.

"What's going on in here?!" Ratchet demanded, increasing his already speedy stride when he spotted a collection of data-pads spread across the table.

Starscream spotted his approach and dived forward with a shrill cat-like noise, scrambling to gather them first. But Ratchet wasn't above wrestling them out of his arms. They fought, claws nicked the back of Ratchet's hand in the struggle.

"*Your Autobot appears to have gotten loose, Starscream,*" Shockwave's posh, bored-sounding voice came over the holograms speakers. Soundwave saved them all from having to listen to any more of his comments by pressing the 'mute' button.

Starscream was unfortunately stronger than Ratchet, and having managed to collect all of the incriminating data-pads, out of frustration or panic (Ratchet wasn't sure) he threw them on the ground and stamped on them until they were shrapnel.

Megatron didn't look up for any of this. He was staring at the top of the table, looking lost and far away. Not a good sign.

Starscream kicked the pieces away and lifted his null ray. "That's *it* medic," he snarled, face flushed with anger. "You've used up the last of my good grace."

"*What* good grace, you lazy trollop?!" Ratchet barked, "All of you! *Lazy!*"

"Why you-!"

Ratchet smacked the end of his null ray away with the back of his hand, moving around him so he could look between Onslaught and Soundwave and Shockwave's glowing holographic optic.

"You're engineers, you're builders, scientists! There's nothing to stop you from creating your *own* energy sources here! If the fragging human's can do it-!"

"What are you trying to imply? That we're stupider than the organic filth that live here-?" Starscream demanded.

"*Lazier!* There is no excuse for you to be running your mechs around in these conditions!" Ratchet yelled to be heard over the seeker focusing on his own smarting ego over the real point he was trying to make. "They're disorganised. They're exhausted. They're starving. Your leader is *having a psychological crisis!*"

"He's fine!" Starscream moved in front of Megatron, blocking him from sight.

"He's not fine! Look at him! He's completely dissociated!"

Soundwave shifted uncomfortably. Starscream glared at Ratchet.

"*Look* at him, Starscream," Ratchet snarled. "What do you think is going to happen to him when you kick down the doors of some power station and the Autobots turn up? There is *always* a sharp shooter with a target lock on him. Always. You think they won't notice he's off his game? You think they won't take *any* shot they can to end the war?!"

Starscream's expression was furious. "...He'll be fine," he said quietly.

"He won't be when his head's blown off because *you* refused to listen to reason."

Starscream said nothing that time.

"I can't stop you from dragging your clueless grunts out to fight, but he-" Ratchet pointed at Megatron, "-is staying here-"

The sneer was back on the seeker's face, "On who's orders?"

"My orders."

"You don't have the power to make that decision. You're a prisoner! You're a *fragging Autobot!*"

"He is my patient. He is unfit for action," Ratchet took a menacing step towards Starscream. Starscream leaned away, optics darting to Soundwave and Onslaught. Neither of them moved in to help. "He's not going anywhere."

He stared Starscream down, but the seeker was almost as stubborn as him. Starscream lifted his chin and refused to back down.

"Soundwave?" Ratchet called to the Third In Command, not for a second breaking eye contact with Starscream.

"...Soundwave: concurs with the medic's assessment."

Starscream whipped around, "You filthy, backstabbing-"

Ratchet grabbed Starscream's wing and turned him to face him again. The seeker was so stunned by the manhandling his null rays didn't even online. He stumbled, shocked, in the direction Ratchet pushed him, towards Megatron. "Take him somewhere quiet until I can get hold of something to help. Now."

Starscream shot him a venomous look, one he kindly took the time to share with Soundwave, and tentatively approached his leader.

He brushed Megatron's hand with his fingertips to get his attention. Megatron jumped, his optics flashing online, upper frame stiffening and straightening, hand snapping out and catching Starscream wrist in what looked like a painfully tight grip. Starscream, to his credit, didn't pull away.

Megatron blinked, coming back to himself, looking around with a frown, "Is there a problem?"

Starscream looked back at Ratchet like he was going to disregard his advice and bait Megatron into proceeding with whatever disaster they'd planned as scheduled.

"...There's going to be a delay," Starscream told him testily.

Ratchet released a breath of relief.

"A delay?" Megatron muttered grumpily, pushing himself away from the table and standing. Starscream began to lead him from the room. "How typical. *Your* doing no doubt-"

"Oh, shut up," Starscream muttered, flicking his wings back and coming close to whipping him across his chest plate with them, "We're working on it."

He flashed Ratchet a look that said he expected payback for this. Ratchet found himself smirking after him, feeling an odd sense of pride that despite everything, Starscream was remarkably reasonable at times.

"And you!" Ratchet pointed at Soundwave next, unwilling to allow any of them the time to reassess their options and get their plot back on track. "Do you know that most of your faction is downstairs trashing the basement? I overheard mention of them starting a game of Pin The Tail On The Ravage as I was leaving-"

Soundwave was sprinting out of the door before he'd finished. That just left Onslaught, who held up his hands before Ratchet even opened his mouth.

"I'm going, I'm going," he was kind enough to hit the disconnect on Shockwave's screen, cutting the scientist off mid-muted sentence.

Ratchet waited for him to leave before dusting his hands off, considering that a plot well thwarted - when he noticed a *sixth* mech present in the room, *hiding*, his field tucked in close and stood behind a pillar that wasn't quite wide enough to conceal a pair of rather voluptuous hips.

Ratchet rolled his optics.

"And you!" He pointed, marching towards the pillar. "Don't think I can't see you hiding behind there with those -"

The mech peaked out, angular face set in an unhappy frown, and the familiar shape of those optics launched Ratchet backwards through time four million years to Rodion, where he had held the clammy hand of a hopeless junkie kid who'd promised he'd make more of himself.

Drift's optics darted from corner to corner, unable to meet Ratchet's stunned gaze. He lifted a hand, then dropped it awkwardly, stepping out from behind the pillar fully and looking all the more ridiculous for having hidden with the paraphernalia of weapons decorating his frame.

Ratchet's fuel pump skipped a beat.

"Hey," Drift spoke softly, quietly, perhaps hoping it would set the tone or protect him from the impending explosion of Ratchet's own vocaliser.

Spoiler: it would not.

Drift Or Deadlock Or Whoever The Hell

The younger mech lifted his chin, shoulders rolling back as he appeared to summon his courage. Like *he* was the unarmed prisoner, and not the gun wielding Decepticon killer. He cleared his vocaliser, breaking the heavy silence with a voice that sounded surer than his expression looked.

"You probably don't remember me-"

"Oh, in your *dreams*," Ratchet cut across him sharply, a palm held up for silence. There was a piercing ache in the centre of his chest, making it difficult to suck in air because the *audacity*, the *flippancy*, as if Ratchet *wouldn't remember*.

He centred himself with a deep breath, ignoring the concerned frown of the complete *idiot* standing before him. He wasn't going to shout. He wasn't going to lose his temper.

"Ratchet-" Drift's voice was low and soft.

"So *this* is the thanks I get for saving your life!?" Ratchet bellowed, the volume setting on his vocaliser switching off. "You become a fragging Decepticon?!"

Drift was wearing a deeply unhappy frown now, but unlike his terrifying counterparts, he came across more pettish than intimidating. It was those stupid-big optics of his that did it. Even if they were now tainted red.

"It's more complicated than you realise, I-" he tried to speak.

"I don't give a scraplet's front-teeth about complications, *look at you!*" Ratchet gestured to the *weapon* Drift had turned himself into, guns and battle armour and *fangs*?! He forced himself to avoid the mech's optics, lest he lose the flow of his anger to those manipulative puppy-eyes. "Look at what they've done to you-"

"*Done* to me?!" Drift sounded annoyed now. "I was an addict. I would have thought anything was an improvement from that."

"Well you thought wrong," Ratchet clenched his jaw. "Primus Drift, I-"

"Deadlock."

Ratchet blinked, anger evaporating with confusion, "...Gesundheit?"

"It's my designation," Drift- Deadlock, whoever the frag he was, said hotly.

Ratchet wanted to roll his optics into the back of his head. "*Dead-Lock*?" He repeated judgementsally, feeling a wave of embarrassment by association. "Well isn't that *classy*. Did you come up with that all by yourself, or did the strip-club assign it to you?"

'Deadlock' was silent.

"What was wrong with the old name?" Ratchet set his fists on his hips and leaned back, looking him up and down. "I liked the old name. I liked the old you."

'Deadlock' looked up with surprise and when Ratchet realised what he'd said, he looked away quickly. The piercing feeling seemed to twist.

He rubbed a hand down his face, feeling a weariness come over him that nothing here so far had matched. Not even Motormaster's exhaust incident. "...What have they done to you?"

'Deadlock's' back was ramrod straight, almost like he was standing at attention. "They gave me a propose," he announced, a little pompously.

"*What* purpose?!" Ratchet snarled. "Killing? How noble."

'Deadlock' didn't even flinch. "It's all I'm good for."

"Who the Pit told you that?!" Ratchet threw up his hands. He was shouting again, his voice echoing back at him in the empty chamber. He didn't care. "Megatron?!"

'Deadlock's' silence told him all he needed to know.

Ratchet moaned, clapping his hands to his optics so he wouldn't have to look at Drift-*Deadlock's* stubborn little face.

"What are you doing here?" He eventually managed, deciding to deal with one problem at a time. "Why were you summoned to the planet? You can't be some sort of master strategist-"

"Can't I?" A brow lifted.

"*No*," Ratchet doubled down. "Anyone willing to adopt the designation '*Deadlock*' clearly doesn't have the logical processing capacity to strategise a war campaign."

Deadlock's lip quirked. "I can't tell if you're more angry over my new name or my chosen profession."

"I'm angry over plenty more than just your embarrassing name," Ratchet pointed at him, "*Do not* get me started."

"You mean you haven't started already?"

The piercing sensation bloomed into a warm unbearable sort of ache. Ratchet was going to combust. His gaskets weren't going to be able to take much more.

He gripped the back of the chair in front of him to brace himself against any growing urge to fly across the war chamber and strangle Drift- no, *Deadlock*, with his *bare* hands. "Just tell me what you're doing here."

"We were sent for."

"By Megatron?"

"Who else?"

"To do what?"

Drift looked away sharply. "You know I can't tell you that."

"Yes you can," Ratchet left the chair and moved towards him, trying to position himself in front of him. But Drift kept turning, glaring resolutely at the ground. "Think of me something like an honourable Decepticon. You'd be amazed how far my Hippocratic Oath can stretch."

Drift still wouldn't look at him, "You're here because you're a prisoner."

Ratchet held up his very clearly uncuffed wrists, "Do I look like a prisoner."

"You look like a *meddler*," Drift finally glared at him. "And you have no idea how close you just came to being vivisected by Starscream."

"I appreciate the concern but I can handle Starscream."

"You don't know him-"

"And you do?" Ratchet eyed him suspiciously.

Drift's mouth shut with an audible clack.

"Tell me what they're planning," he tried again.

"Ratchet," Drift sighed, wide shoulders slumping.

"I just need to know how stupid it is. I don't like surprises."

"My allegiance is with them," Deadlock growled, fangs glinting. "Not you. Regardless of the past, it's been a long war. I've seen things, done things. If you knew who I really was, what I've done, you'd..."

He looked away. Ratchet didn't, staring imploringly at his dimming optics. "I'd what?"

Drift shook his helm, "Things have changed-"

"Well I haven't."

"You're grumpier," Drift muttered.

Ratchet lifted his finger in preparation of a rant, "Now you listen *here*-!"

"You can't lecture this out of me. I won't betray them, not even for you."

"I'm not asking you to betray anyone, I know you're not Starscream. But you're putting your trust in the wrong faction, and you know it-"

"Well I was hardly going to be an Autobot, was I?!"

"Why not?"

"Why haven't you escaped?" Drift demanded, abruptly changing the subject. "The Stunticons say you've been here for weeks, under minimum security. If you wanted to leave you could have."

Ratchet shrugged, "I'm an old mech. Can't drive like I used to."

"That's a load of slag."

"Fine, you want to know what I'm doing here? I'm trying to *help*. I'm trying to stop them from killing innocent people. I'm trying to stop them from getting *themselves* killed! Even that block-head of a leader you decided to get a personality transplant for."

Drift's gaze softened, "I'm still me, Ratchet. I'm more myself than I've ever been."

"You're trying not to be," Ratchet said, condemning. "I know it's written into Decepticon law that you all have to distrust and hate everyone around you to appear more *edgy* and intimidating, but

I'm trying to help them."

"I know you are," Drift exhaled heavily, "You like to help. Even those who don't deserve it."

"If you're talking about yourself, cut it out. I don't tolerate self pity."

Drift mouth lifted into something of a constipated attempt at a smile. Ratchet returned a more socially acceptable version of it, reaching out to clap a hand to his shoulder. Taken by surprise, Deadlock flinched before it made contact. Ratchet dropped his hand immediately, the warmth, and even the piercing pain from earlier, now falling away. He closed his fingers into a fist, feeling hollow.

He cleared his vocaliser, "Fine, if your misplaced sense of loyalty really won't let you tell me what disaster they're planning, you can do something else for me. As a favour. To pay me back for saving your miserable life all those years ago."

Drift looked wary. "What?"

"I'm going to need you to steal something from the Ark for me."

Drift -Deadlock, or whatever the hell he wanted to call himself- left shortly after their discussion with a somewhat intimidatingly sincere promise to return with the item Ratchet needed.

Still whiplashed by the discovery, and having no idea if he could even trust the mech, Ratchet was on edge. He vaguely remembered Skywarp mentioning something about a homeless addict turned assassin earlier in his stay, and with a distinct lack of other candidates, it seemed more and more likely that Drift had been the party in question. An assassin.

A top assassin.

Not just a solidier shooting blindly at enemy grunts to survive as best he could, but a highly trained operative, whose entire function in war was to slit throats in wash-racks and extinguish sleeping mech's sparks. It took a ...special sort of mech to live such a existence, let alone take pride in it,

Ratchet didn't want to think about it, as a nervous pit opened wider and wider in the place where his fuel tanks should be. He had sent perhaps one of the most dangerous Decepticons currently on the planet into the Ark, where his unsuspecting friends and comrades relaxed, and socialised, and recharged. Their guards at their lowest.

And all for one lousy piece of equipment? His priorities had never been so skewered.

He could at least distract himself with busy work while he waited for Drift's return, but his steady, flawless hands now shook when they held a light-pen. He was simply too unsettled. Of all the nonsense and stress he had suffered through over the last few weeks; facing down Starscream, Megatron, sometimes *both* of them at the same time, giving responsible-interfacing lectures to half the enemy faction, starting arguments with the personification of radiation-poisoning on golden legs- all he had done without so much as a twitch. He knew what to do. He knew how to deal with them.

But Drift...

No, *Deadlock*, he reminded himself.

Ratchet shook his helm angrily. His worst trait was idealising figures from his past. Everything had seemed so pure and honest before the war, even the most flawed of it. But now it had tainted even the one mech he had always thought really deserved that second chance...

He left the repair-bay, deciding to take a walk before he threw one of the shiny updated tools Starscream had redesigned for him. He was already on the seeker's bad side.

There wasn't much by way of distraction now. Soundwave had effectively cleared out the illegal party in the basement, and from what Ratchet could garner when he'd come across Swindle trying to squeeze himself into an overstocked supply-closet, the Communications Officer was still handing out punishments for it to. Apparently, the newcomers were bad influences and it had gotten even wilder in Ratchet's absence.

So wild, that the brig was now full, and Soundwave was having to resort to confining perpetrators to their quarters. It all sounded a lot like something Prowl would do. And as Soundwave was known for being firm but *fair* (and much more empathic than the Autobot tactician) it was a tad out of character for him to be so tenacious over something as harmless as a sneaky little party.

"What did you *do*?" Ratchet asked, watching Swindle toss out cleaning drones and barrels to try and make room for himself.

"He found out about the 'Pin the Tail on Ravage' game!" Swindle stepped inside and tried to seal the door behind him. It hit his knee halfway across and opened again. Swindle cursed, punching frantically at the door panel again. "I didn't even play! I was only taking bets!"

Ratchet didn't feel guilty for having been the one to snitch on that particular game.

And he certainly didn't feel any sense of sympathy when Soundwave then came swooping around the corner, like a navy-blue storm cloud on the warpath. Ravage was cradled like a baby in the crook of his arm, a detached tail gripped in Soundwave's free hand. His glowing visor locked on Swindle's shrinking frame. There was no mercy in his gaze.

Swindle screamed.

Ratchet didn't feel any urge to help either, as he watched the large blue mech dangle Swindle by his foot and *shake* until the struggling mech finally opened his subspace and let the plethora of betting contraband spill out onto the decking.

Once Swindle had been unceremoniously tossed into his quarters and locked in, the halls of the base were now refreshingly quiet and free of fleeing troublemakers, Soundwave joined Ratchet in the repair bay and loomed expectantly over him. His intimidation factor was somewhat lessened by the curled up Ravage nestled against his chest, who was scowling at the ceiling with a mix of indignation and resignation.

Ratchet cleared his vocaliser and reached for the tail, "I'll take that. Set him on the slab."

The tail had been detached by its safety latches, not ripped off savagely as Ratchet had initially feared. It meant Ravage wasn't in any pain and nothing was damaged -asides from the Cassette's pride, that was.

Neither of them spoke while Ratchet worked, and thankfully it was a quick job. He stepped back and brushed his hands off, watching Ravage sit up and swish his tail in approval.

Satisfied, Soundwave stepped forward to pick him up again, at which point Ravage heckled his armour, hunched up defensively, and hissed at him, fangs and claws bared. He jumped down off the slab himself, shooting Soundwave an intolerant look.

Soundwave watched him slink from the room silently.

"Teenagers, huh," Ratchet stood alongside him.

Soundwave turned at the neck and stared down at him silently.

"No need to thank me," Ratchet muttered, moving away.

"Your assistance is appreciated," Soundwave droned. Then left. Which, to be fair, was as good as a bouquet of flowers from him.

Now absent of distractions -doubly so now that everyone had been sent to their rooms to think about their behaviour by Soundwave- Ratchet sat back on the slab and stared at the door, waiting for Drift to return.

Or Deadlock.

Or whoever he was supposed to be.

He rubbed his hands over his face. What a day.

Ratchet had been dozing -*not* napping, he had curried the favour of at least ninety percent of the enemy faction but that, by no means, meant it was safe to snooze away out in the open of the repair bay mere hours after ruining Starscream's day- when something brushed his shoulder.

The only reason he didn't leap up and kick the mech intruding on his personal space in the codpiece was because something in their field was reading as vaguely non-threatening to his own security measures.

Still, he jumped, gasping like a frightened old fool and losing his balance. He fell sideways off the examination slab he had been precariously balanced against and stumbled, gyros slower to respond than they had been.

He would have slammed head first into the equipment table had a firm hand not reached to steady him, catching his wrist and pulling him upright in one smooth, sure movement. Ratchet found himself upright and unscathed and not quite sure how he got there. He cleared the fuzzy static from his vision and looked up.

Drift's concerned optics stared back. Ratchet's chest ached.

"I have it," Drift said, apropos of nothing.

Ratchet's processor was still fogged from his *not*-nap, and any hope of it rebooting with any measure of haste was hindered by his fluctuating spark confusing his HUD readouts, trying to tell him he was stressed. He *knew* he was stressed. He didn't need his fragging HUD to tell him that!

"Have what?" He asked stupidly.

Drift withdrew a data-pad from his subspace and held it aloft. Ratchet's processor finally caught up with events. He brushed Drift's hand off his arm, ignoring the disheartened look it prompted from him, and went to snatch the data-pad from his grip.

Unfortunately, unlike most of the hapless fools residing among the Decepticons, Drift was inconveniently clever and though it didn't always show, armed with dangerous levels of common sense. He lifted the data-pad away, high above his helm out of Ratchet's reach.

"What is it?"

"A data-pad," Ratchet growled, refusing to stretch or bounce on his feet for it. He wasn't getting roped into a game of keep away. "Obviously."

Drift's stoic expression did not change. "It's not a book."

"How would you know?"

Drift said nothing.

"You tried to get into it?" Ratchet folded his arms, pinning the Decepticon with most reproachful look.

"It was encrypted," Drift said accusingly, matching Ratchet's stubborn scowl. "So unless it's your *diary*, it contains sensitive information. Why would you ask me to retrieve confidential data from your own faction?"

"I wouldn't," Ratchet growled.

"So it's something else," Deadlock's optics narrowed.

"As much as I'd love to share it with you, it's none of your damn business."

"Then I can't give it to you," Drift stepped back.

Ratchet couldn't believe he'd be so pedantic. Most of the Decepticons here didn't even question what he was doing when he was fiddling around *inside* them. But *Deadlock*, Decepticon Of The Century, wouldn't trust him with a data-pad?!

"You just broke into the Ark and stole it for me," Ratchet reminded him hotly, finding it difficult to not start shouting. What *was* it about this mech that made him shout? "But now you've decided you can't let me have it after all."

"It could be dangerous."

"It's a *data-pad*, not a bomb!"

"Then what is on it?"

Ratchet just didn't have the energy to go round and round like this. "It's... It's for Megatron." He admitted.

It didn't soothe Drift's suspicions. In fact, his fingers tightened on it. "What *is* it?"

"That's between Megatron and I."

Drift turned on his heel, "Then I shall ask him."

"Like he's in any mood to talk to you," Ratchet snarled, marching quickly to block him. "It's a programme, that's all. It's harmless."

Drift didn't appear to believe him. "Explain it to me."

Ratchet worked his tongue around his mouth. He could make up some nonsense about it being a programme to eradicate megalomania, but Drift wasn't anywhere near stupid enough to believe him. "It's to help him calm down. He's had a bad day."

Drift looked at the unassuming data-pad suspiciously, bringing it down so he could turn it over in his hands. "What does it do, to calm him?"

"It-" Ratchet exhaled, bracing himself. This wasn't going to sound good. "It overrides his battle computer and puts it into a temporary dormancy."

Drift's optics sharpened like blades, a dark look crossing over his face, mouth pressing into a hard thin line. He looked much more like the terrifying Decepticon he claimed to be then. Ratchet even took a step back.

"You're *deliberately* disarming him?!"

Ratchet held up his hands, palms out. "It won't matter if he's disarmed if he'd not going into battle-"

"It does if this is *permanent*."

"I told you it's not! It's temporary."

"How does this calm him down?" Drift brandished the data-pad. "When you're making him defenceless-!?"

"His *defences* are what has him all messed up in the first place," Ratchet snapped. "His battle computer thinks he's in a threatening situation because his processor keeps getting stuck in a repetitive loop of past traumas. I shut down the battle computer, and it stops running risk assessments on nonexistent threats. If it's dormant, he will recharge. If he recharges, his databanks can self-repair the memory loop and he'll wake up feeling vaguely functional again. Not that this is any of *your* business!"

Drift was staring in confusion now. "He would have recovered on his own, eventually. You didn't need to go through the effort of sending me to retrieve this."

"Get over it," Ratchet rolled his optics, hand out for the data-pad.

"No, I meant-" Drift placed the data-pad into his hand, no arguments this time. "What I meant was that you used up your one favour from me, for Megatron."

"I'll get plenty more favours out of you, don't you worry," Ratchet muttered, unlocking the encryption to open the data-pad.

He didn't notice Drift smiling at him, but he heard his amused little, "Sure," of disbelief as he turned to leave the repair bay behind Ratchet.

Ratchet looked back, mouth open to reprimand the sarcasm.

But Drift had already disappeared.

Ratchet blew air out of his vents, rolling his shoulders to rid them off the stiffness that had built up

from the tension in his back all cycle. And the day wasn't over yet. Now he had to risk his life for the *third* time in less than twenty four hours to somehow download this programme into Megatron's processor. Preferably without a repeat of what happened earlier.

Maybe it would have been better if he had let them all go through with their 'battle plan' after all. Buncha morons.

Bad Boyfriends And Show Offs

Ratchet purged all thoughts of homicidal, gun-wielding assassins (with deceptively innocent optics) from his mind to better focus on the bigger picture problem. The 'bigger picture' being the ticking time bomb that was a compromised Decepticon warlord. And the deranged seeker he had left with him. His guess was as good as anyone's as to whether or not either of them were still alive.

Still, he had yet to hear any terrorised screams echoing about the base. That had to be a good sign.

Regretfully, it wasn't a sure thing it would stay that way. Megatron was an unpredictable mech at the best of times, and now that he had strung his nerves up tighter than the string of an electro-harp, Ratchet was going to have to treat him like wounded Insecticon -a beast that could whip around and take his helm off at the slightest provocation.

Were he a mech prone to feelings of nervousness, he might have needed to psych himself up before entering High Command's lair of horrors.

It turned out not to be necessary though, as outside Megatron's Command Quarters, leaning against the pressure-warped metal panels of the corridor, was Starscream, poking at the screen of some interactive data-pad.

Ratchet threw up his arms in disbelief. No wonder he hadn't heard any fighting if they weren't even in the same room together.

"What in the scrap do you think are you *doing*?!"

Starscream looked up with an unsurprised frown, "What does it look like I'm doing? Waiting *this* out."

"I said- I *told* you to keep an optic on him!" Ratchet spluttered over his words. "Not to hide in the corridor playing video games!"

"It's not a game. It's a simulation programme for the-" Starscream cut himself abruptly, realising that the purpose of whatever device he was holding wasn't something an Autobot needed to know. He unsobly slipped it into his subspace, clearing his vocaliser.

"I'm not *hiding*," He said nasally, clasping his hands behind his back and straightening up. "I'm respecting his personal space."

"You're a coward," Ratchet growled. "Get out of the way-"

A sky blue forearm cut across his path, a fist slamming into the frame of Megatron's door with a dull clang. Starscream's scowling face was inches from his audial. "Where do you think you're going?"

Ratchet's fingers flexed around the data-pad, "To tend to my patient."

"He doesn't want to see you."

"And how would *you* know, fairy-wings?" Ratchet wrinkled his nose into a sneer.

A pointy little claw ended up pointed directly at it.

"Whatever underhanded scheme you've come up with to delay our plans further, I would suggest you drop it before it gets you killed. Not everyone is as tolerant of these delays as I. They won't hesitate to make their displeasure known-"

"My God," Ratchet squinted at him, "Is that *concern*?! From you?"

"It's a threat!" Starscream hissed, but some colour had flooded his facial derma. The armour plates of his forearm creaked as he tightened his fist. "If this thing goes south because of your meddling *I'll* get the blame for everyone starving!"

"You're already starving," Ratchet said blandly, the ache of guilt such a fact had once inspired in his tanks had now numbed. It was a fact of life down here. He was starving too.

(Still didn't make it a good enough excuse to go on murder sprees.)

"Here," he held up the data-pad in front of Starscream's nose, close to slapping him in the face with it, deciding to take the risk and share it with him. "It's a programme. It offlines a battle computer and locks it into dormancy. It should ...help. Megatron. Calm him down." He finished lamely.

Over the top of the data-pad Starscream's optics had widened in interest, the irises sharpening like a magpie spying a treasure. It was a very different reaction to Drift's disapproving disgust - but then, Starscream was hardly the model of a loyal Deception.

Ratchet began to worry again for an entirely different reason as Starscream's brow arched in the way that indicated a great deal of plotting had begun to occur behind those bright, round optics.

"How ...clever of you," he eventually purred, lips curving upwards at the corners. "Will it ...change his behaviour?" He asked *so* innocently, it was clear he was thinking about anything but.

Ratchet scowled. "No," he lied.

"How long does it last for?"

"I'm not telling you that."

Starscream pursed his lips unhappily, "I think have a right to know."

Ratchet nearly laughed. "Like Pit you do."

"I'm his next of kin!" Starscream announced shrilly, "and since he's in no way capable of making a medical decision of his nature for himself-"

"He's perfectly capable, Starscream, he's not in a fragging coma." Ratchet scoffed. "And you are *not* his next of kin. Soundwave is. I've been through every scrap of records your repair-bay had and your designation on the half-completed form *someone* couldn't be bothered to fill out has been angrily scribbled over," Ratchet smirked, "after an argument, I'm guessing."

Starscream was frowning like he was remembering such an occurrence.

The seeker shook his helm and flapped his hand, "Regardless of your inability to locate the appropriate paperwork that definitely *does* exist, it'd be irresponsible of me to allow an enemy to implant unchecked programming into my superior's processor." He held out his hand. "I'll study it."

Ratchet didn't hand it over.

Starscream jaw ticked. "Medic-"

"I've told you not to call me medic, and no," Ratchet said firmly. "Now get out of the way if you're not coming in with me." And before Starscream could argue with him again, Ratchet hit the door panel.

True to form, it wasn't locked -it never was- and opened immediately. Starscream's fist slipped from where it had been braced against the doorway to prevent Ratchet's entry, and he stumbled over the threshold.

Ratchet followed after him, overtaking him and making a beeline towards where Megatron was sat at a modest looking desk facing the wall, where he seemed unnaturally interested in one particular rust stain.

Ratchet stopped a careful distance away, the data-pad held between both hands in front of him like a shield. "Megatron?" He called.

There was no response.

Ratchet glanced back at Starscream and gestured with an angry nod for him to approach. Starscream was brushing himself off from his fall, and began to angrily gesture back that *he* wasn't coming any closer. Ratchet mouthed at him to '*get over yourself!*' And Starscream mouthed back an unrepeatable curse word and several suggestions that Ratchet emulate Motormaster and shove the data-pad up his-

Megatron turned, just as Starscream mimed the most vulgar action of his suggestion.

"What are you doing in here?"

They both jumped.

"The medic has come to perform more of his experiments on you," Starscream announced before Ratchet could speak. Which was the last idea he needed anyone planting in Megatron's processor. Perhaps Starscream *should* have waited out in the corridor.

Megatron's expression didn't change. He didn't even flinch.

"Obviously I am *not* here to do experiments," Ratchet said testily, shooting daggers at Starscream. "Your second in command is an infant."

"True," Megatron mumbled, glancing at the affronted seeker. "You had better be here with an update on proceedings. You know how I feel about delays..."

There was a hint of menace to his tone. Starscream's mouth opened but no sound came out. He glanced at Ratchet for help. Ratchet should have let the self-serving brat drown, but he found himself filling the silence anyway.

"Soundwave was dealing with it," he diverted Megatron's shortened temper away from it's favourite, easiest target. Starscream didn't have the grace to look thankful, but he did flash a smug look Megatron's way.

"So the medic is privy to confidential information now, is he?" Megatron asked Starscream as if Ratchet were not there. "At what point do we simply cut our losses and initiate him properly? When do you plan on branding him, Starscream?"

"He doesn't know anything," Starscream muttered snippily, at the same time Ratchet lost the self restraint to stay silent and snapped, "You try and stick one of your ugly insignias on me and I'll shove the branding iron right up your-!"

"You only think they're ugly because a stunted box of a machine like you could never hope to pull it off!" It was Starscream, not Megatron, that piped up to bite his head off, sounding *genuinely* offended, much to Ratchet's vindictive pleasure.

"Not that it matters because if we wanted to prevent sensitive information from your time here getting to your Autobot friends, we'd kill you," Starscream glanced at Megatron. "A far more permanent solution."

Megatron grunted, only half listening. And that he couldn't be bothered to keep up with the utter inappropriateness of a prisoner arguing with his second-in-command in the middle of his own private quarters, could not be a good sign. Starscream must have sensed so too, as he allowed a rare pause to settle over them. Megatron was staring into the middle distance, a blankness fogging his optics.

Ratchet shifted uncomfortably. Starscream did absolutely nothing.

He wished he possessed even just an iota of Soundwave's telepathic power to project himself into Starscream's clueless little head and shout 'Are you not going to do something about this!'

Because *he* certainly wasn't going to coddle the slagmaker.

Before the discomfort of the situation could reach its peak, Megatron snapped himself out of it with a sharp twitch, standing abruptly. The scrape of his chair across the decking caused Starscream to jump, and Ratchet felt a sharp sting of worry at how many times before the seeker might have seen his leader have one of these episodes, and what sort of fall out would make the usually idiotically fearless moron react like that to it.

"I don't have the patience for this," Megatron snapped, storming across the room towards the wash-racks. "Deal with it, Starscream."

The wash-rack door shut with a whoosh and click behind him. Starscream inhaled sharply.

"Oh well *done*, medic-"

Ratchet turned on him, "I don't think I've ever seen such a sad excuse for a boyfriend in all my life and *I've* watched human daytime talk shows." He pointed at Starscream. "Do you even like each other?"

"What in Primus's name is a 'boy-friend'?" Starscream scoffed with considerable disgust, cringing away from saying the word. "And no, as a matter of fact, we don't like each other-"

"The reveal of the century," Ratchet muttered, eyeing the wash-rack door as he heard the solvent shower switch on. "I'm not going to be able to get anywhere near him to administer this without him breaking my arm off and feeding it to me..."

"And I should think so too," Starscream idly crossed the room and nosily pushed about the files on Megatron's desk. Something must have interested him, because he picked one of the data-pads up and slipped it into his subspace. Remorseless thief. "He'd sooner let *me* download a programme of suspect origins into his head."

"Will you?"

Starscream span around, air across his wings creating a high ringing sound. "What?"

"Will you treat him," Ratchet held up the programme, "With this?"

Starscream's optics narrowed, "I should have known. You're too much of a coward to do it yourself."

"Well since you're so brave and heroic, Starscream-"

"Slanderous lies! I've never claimed to be heroic-!"

"If you have even the tiniest scrap of affection for him-"

"I don't."

Ratchet held out the data-pad. "Do it."

Starscream took the offered programme, mouth turned downwards into cartoonishly deep frown. "What makes you think he'll let *me* close enough?"

"Cuddle him," Ratchet began to walk away, making sure to leave the room in a timely manner, before Starscream changed his mind.

"I'd rather die!" Starscream protested vehemently.

"Then get him in his recharge," Ratchet called from the doorway, ignoring the little voice in the back of his head saying that was immoral. This was Starscream after all. He'd done worse. "When he wakes up, he'll be a whole new mech."

He hoped.

And If something did go wrong? He'd still be around to piece Starscream back together again in the morning.

Ratchet didn't make it back to his own berth -the berth he had been so graciously given by his dysfunctional captives, that was- until the very early hours of the next cycle. The base was deathly silent, creaking and groaning hauntingly under the weight of the ocean above, but otherwise, lifeless. A stark contrast to the revelry of the party earlier in the evening.

All this in one night ...he would forever remember this as the worst day of inoculations he had ever had to give. Even beating out the time Ironhide had hidden inside one of the hyperfuel intake turbines to avoid him, only to end up in literal pieces (twelve, to be precise) in his med-bay anyway after an unknowing Perceptor had powered up the engines to run an experiment. And then Optimus had lectured *him* like it was Ratchet's poor bedside manner that had been the cause of Ironhide's boneheaded decision when Prime knew damn well Ironhide had *always* been a moron when it came to repairs and upkeep.

At least no one here ever thought to complain about his lack of coddling.

In the quiet of the pre-dawn shift, processor ticking over the days mistakes, he summoned enough self-assurance to convince himself that if anything more happened now, he would at least be able to hear it. He kept his audials tuned, listening out for the sounds that had become familiar. The

stumbling shuffle of Drag Strip sleepwalking. The low base of Skywarp's filthy laugh in the Air Barracks across the corridor. The cutting pitch of Starscream's voice arguing with some undeserving grunt -or fully deserving warlord.

But there was silence. The base stirred and rattled like it's halls were the air vents of a slumbering Titan. Ratchet shuttered his optics, trying hard not to think of the chaos that would fill it the next day. And all those new Con's he was going to have to break in.

Ratchet didn't get to sleep late the next morning. He never did here.

It was an impossibility when he'd had the privilege of being housed in the base's most high traffic corridor, halfway between the flight hanger and mess hall. It's long, straight length made it a perfect echo chamber, and much like the twittering of birds nesting in the mountainside near the Ark had woken him before, Ratchet was still being roused by some form of rowdy 'bird' here.

The *throom* and then menacingly violent shudder of some idiot breaking the sound barrier, *indoors*, jolted Ratchet to wakefulness. He optics snapped open as the slam of heavy impact sounded, jolting the room hard enough to shake loose droplets of leaked seawater from the ceiling. Ratchet scowled at the rusty patch above him, sleep deprived, and fuel deprived, and *common sense* deprived, as a chorus of laughs sounded and someone (*Acid Storm*, he recognised the goofy giggle) baited the culprit into doing it again.

He shot out of berth, barely registering his own movements as he stormed out into the smoke filled corridor. He opened his mouth to suck in a deep breath to shout, but the sound of his door sliding open alerted his victims to his arrival.

Ratchet couldn't be sure if his reputation was really quite so fearsome at this point that elite Decepticon seekers ran, squawking like a flock of panicked pigeons, at the mere sight of him, or if it was simply that less than two hours of recharge had left him with the deranged appearance of a recently reanimated spark-eater.

Either way, they ran, and that worked just fine for him.

Ratchet let himself deflate as the last seeker, Novastorm, disappeared into a side corridor, wing pinging against the wall as she took the corner too sharply.

And here he'd thought Sideswipe and Sunstreaker racing through the corridors of the Ark had been bad...

Since the inhibitions of the average Decepticon tended to drop as the cycle proceeded, Ratchet decided to give up on any chances recovering lost recharge and began to trudge towards the mess hall. Asides from seekers behaving badly, most of the scheduled morning shift already seemed to be in the mess.

With all the extra mecha it was packed the fullest Ratchet had ever seen it. It oddly reminded him of going out to fuel on a busy holiday on Cybertron, and a familiar warmth settled over him at the sight of so many mechs packed together, laughing, joking, shoving at each other and bickering.

The sensation was dampened drastically by the abysmal shot-sized serving of fuel they were all nursing.

"You look kinda gross. Like you're dying."

Ratchet didn't register that the speaker was addressing him until a hand appeared before his face and waved. He was too tired to even push it away.

"What?" He snapped, turning his gaze towards the bothersome source.

A unsympathetic Frenzy grimaced up at him. "Wow, who do you call when the medic needs a medic?"

"Another medic," Rumble materialised out of thin air besides his brother. "Knock Out's just over there if you need him."

Ratchet would literally rather just die.

Dismissing the suggestion of medical intervention, Ratchet blinked slowly down at the twins, unsure of where they had manifested from, until he looked up again and noticed Soundwave *looming* over him like a great navy storm cloud.

He veered back, half convinced he was about to be grabbed by the throat and dragged off for an interrogation.

"Autobot Ratchet; exhibiting signs of recharge deprivation," Soundwave diagnosed.

Ratchet rolled his optics. He'd gone for longer on less sleep -as a much younger mech, granted, but he could manage.

"Is Megatron alright?" He asked, steering the conversation away from his own condition. It had only been a few hours, but if something had gone wrong, Soundwave would have known about it by now.

"Information: inconclusive," Soundwave admitted. "Starscream; uncooperative."

"Is Megatron's comm frequency still receiving?"

Soundwave nodded.

"Then he's still alive at least," Ratchet brushed by him, ambling off.

Soundwave turned aside to let him pass, his glowing visor following him. "Your fuel ration-"

"Save it," Ratchet sighed, heading further into the mess, "I'm not hungry. Give it to your cassettes..."

There was something of a gathering at the far end of the mess hall -where most of the mischief took place in the mornings, as though the usual culprits had gotten it into their heads that Soundwave couldn't *see* what they were up to if they stood really far away from him.

Ratchet increased his pace, remembering the morning he had walked in to catch Vortex with an energon blade attached to a length of rope tied to the end of one of his fan blades -which he had been about to spin.

Mercifully it wasn't Vortex, and no one was being irresponsible with their weaponry.

Instead it was just Deadlock. On the floor. *Showing off*.

A circle of onlookers had gathered around him to watch as the prize assassin stretched out his impressively hypermobile joints. As Ratchet came to the front of the group, Deadlock was upside-down, balancing on his hands, a position which he then effortlessly changed to a split leg handstand, legs straight, toes pointed.

Bonecrusher was staring with his mouth open. Motormaster squeezed his cube so hard it shattered in his hand. He didn't appear to notice.

"Big deal!" Skywarp announced exactly what Ratchet had been thinking, moving into the circle besides Deadlock. "I can do that!"

"Warp," Thundercracker tried.

Skywarp, full of undeserved confidence, ignored him, threading his fingers together and cracking his knuckles before throwing himself into a handstand of his own. He wobbled, struggling to stay straight.

Ratchet stepped forward. "You're gonna land on your face."

"It's easy!" Skywarp's pale face had filled with energon, his brow creased in concentration as his wings threatened to tip him over. Seekers were graceful, and flexible, and strong -when they were the right way up and in the air, that was.

Skywarp began to separate his legs, wobbled again, began to tip- and in trying to right himself, his palm slipped.

And he landed on his face with a bang that caused the entire audience to wince. The rest of Skywarp's frame thunked to the ground after him. Sulking, he didn't rise until Thundercracker began to tug him upright.

"You watching me was throwing me off," Skywarp complained, a hand covering his face to hide the unattractive dent in his nose.

"Sure Warp," Thundercracker tugged him harshly away.

"Well I hope you're happy," Ratchet snapped at Deadlock.

Deadlock froze mid contortion, his helm snapping to the side to meet Ratchet's glare. After a moment of disbelief he unfolded himself from the ridiculous pose he was in and sprang upright again, scowling. "Me? What did I do?"

"...You know what you were doing," Ratchet began to feel heat build in his cheeks and knew it was diminishing the strength of his withering glare.

He scoffed at Deadlock and left him to his audience of admirers.

Thanks to him, he had a nose to re-straighten.

Ratchet Vs Sunstorm Part 2

Ratchet's morning didn't improve from there.

Still annoyed by Deadlock's unnecessary performance that morning, and even more annoyed that he didn't know *why* he was so annoyed, Ratchet might have let his bad temper affect his once light-handed servos.

Skywarp bitched and moaned that he was being too rough as he hammered out the cosmetic damage to his nose, and it took twice as long as it should have to straighten it out again- and that was even taking into account how often Thundercracker interrupted with comments about how Ratchet shouldn't make it *too* straight, spouting some sentimental nonsense about liking the historic dents and scuffs Skywarp's beaming face had collected over the years.

The seekers were barely satisfied with his work when the third member of their co-dependant trine arrived, and Ratchet decided he was fully prepared to turn around and slice Skywarp's nose clean off if Starscream started nitpicking too.

But it wasn't his injured friend the Air Commander had any interest in.

"You tricked me!" Starscream's screech rang through the air at a decibel high enough to shake glass.

Ratchet was slammed against the bulkhead a split-second later, hand on his throat. Processor groggy and slow to process, Starscream's quick march across the repair bay had felt like teleportation.

Pinned in place, he huffed aggrievedly and frowned up at the seething creature above him- it's shiny, perfect armour heckled to sharp points, wings sticking up like spines on a dragon's back. It felt like being threatened by a very large, very colourful hedgehog.

Ratchet struggled to swallow with the hand locked so tightly around his throat. "And how *is* rivet-face this morning?" He enquired lightly.

"Screamer, c'mon," Skywarp protested from the medberth, smoothing a piece of setting-tape across his re-shaped nose. "Can't you at least wait till he's done with my nose?"

He was ignored.

"How is *Megatron*?" Starscream repeated. "How do you think he is?" Starscream bared his denta fiercely, white and perfect and fanged as they were -like Drift's.

Where had *that* thought come from.

Ratchet grabbed at Starscream's wrist. Skipping fuel that morning was not doing him favours now. He didn't have anywhere near the strength to shift him. "He's not-?"

"He's fine," Starscream snarled, slamming him against the bulkhead again. "It's *me* you should be concerned for. Me. For having to put up with him. When does it wear off!"

Ratchet squinted, "When does what-?"

"Don't play with me!" Starscream yelled. "You said it wouldn't affect his personality! You lied to

me-

Ah. The programme he'd prescribed. Megatron must have been susceptible to the side affects. Against better judgment, Ratchet smiled, "Heaven forbid you should get a taste of your own medicine."

Starscream's his left arm flexed like he was about to swing up his nullray and shoot. Noticing this, Thundercracker shifted, finally about to intervene -reluctantly, if the resigned expression on his face was any indication of things. But before things could dissolve into an embarrassing seeker on seeker scuffle, the door to the hallway opened. And for the first time in four million years, Megatron proved he could be useful for something after all.

He stood in the doorway but didn't enter, looking perfectly stoic and arrogant and annoyed, and very much his usual self. Ratchet, still pinned to the wall by his neck, looked between Megatron and Starscream's angry, but flushed face expectantly.

"War chambers; five minutes," was all Megatron said, glaring at Starscream's back. His dark optics shifted to Thundercracker and Skywarp next, wordlessly communicating that the order applied to them as well.

Starscream exhaled sharply, still glaring at Ratchet, refusing to turn and face his leader.

"Starscream," Megatron prompted.

"I heard you," Starscream muttered snappishly, his wings flicking angrily before settling lower. "...I'll be there."

Megatron cast a scrutinising optic over the repair bay, said nothing on Ratchet's clear predicament, and then left without another word. It was all rather anticlimactic.

Ratchet summoned energy enough from his reserves of anger to smack Starscream's wrist and knock his hand from his neck. He rubbed the abused cables peevishly. "You drama queen, he's exactly the same!"

"He is *not* the same. You have corrupted his mind!"

Ratchet brought his hands to his chest, "*I've* corrupted *him*?"

"With your revolting, gooey Autobot 'feelings'!"

"News flash, Starscream, '*feelings*' aren't an Autobot thing. Everyone has feelings. Even *humans* have feelings, you spiteful, hate-filled piece of-"

"He's just angry cuz Megatron told him he loved him," Skywarp interjected from the medberth, prodding at the setting-tape still strapped across the bridge of his nose.

Ratchet was shocked enough into silence. Starscream looked at Skywarp like he wanted to incinerate his face with his thruster heel.

"That was a private conversation," Thundercracker tutted and ripped the setting-tape off Skywarp's face, causing him to flinch and hiss.

"It's still private," he protested in an immature whine. "He's a medic! His programming doesn't let him gossip."

Ratchet hadn't had time to process any of this before Starscream really did stick his nullray in his face. He was incensed and humiliated- all teeth, and sparking optics, and ragged breathing,

"This never leaves the room," he warned.

Ratchet looked down the business end of the weapon, "...I wish *you'd* leave the room."

"We're going," Thundercracker agreed, dragging Skywarp off the medberth and collecting Starscream as he went. "We're going to be late as it is-"

"What does it matter," Skywarp was protesting as he was hustled out the door, "if Megatron loves Screamer we can get away with- Ahh!"

The door shut just as the vicious clang of something smacking a wing sounded.

Ratchet stared at the closed door after them, and wondered if it would work in his favour if he explained to Starscream that as much as the seeker might like to deny away the admission of Megatron's feelings as the ramblings of a mad mech, the simple programme that had temporarily affected his leader's personal inhibitions *wasn't* secretly some quasi-mystical love-potion devised with the nefarious intention of forcing Starscream to deal with emotions he clearly didn't want to acknowledge. Or, if having that conversation was just a surefire way to get himself beheaded.

That Starscream really thought anyone would go to such lengths over so inconsequential a thing - just proved how *not* inconsequential such a reality was to him. It meant those shameful feelings were likely reciprocated. Ratchet almost felt a stirring in his battered old spark at the concept. Almost.

Primus, they deserved each other. Evil bastards they both were...

He was left in relative peace after that. He even managed to catch a few minutes recharge, propped upright against the wall facing the door, a data-pad of inventory resting in his lap. The moment someone entered he could online his optics and look engrossed in his work. They'd be none the wiser.

"Are you asleep?"

Ratchet snapped his optics online with a start, jolting forward in his seat and knocking the data-pad to the floor with a slap. Breakdown was stood in front of him, an amused curl to his mouth.

Ratchet scowled, "I was resting my optics."

"You were snoring."

"What the Hell do you want?" Ratchet muttered, groaning as he bent to pick up the data-pad. When he straightened up again he felt lightheaded. That couldn't be a good sign. "I'm busy."

"I just wanted to check up on you."

Ratchet glared at him.

Breakdown rubbed the back of his neck, "Not that you need- I- Motormaster said you yelled at that assassin with the hips this morning? I guess I wanted to make sure he hadn't done anything to you."

Outsiders like him can be a little unhinged sometimes."

Ratchet snorted, rolling his optics, "I didn't *yell*. I don't yell."

Breakdown blinked twice, clearly uncomfortable.

"Well I'm fine," Ratchet sat himself down at a desk and shoved the inventory data-pad back into a drawer with the others. "I'm more interested in how your evening was-" He leaned back and took Breakdown in with critical optics. "-With your pretty little sports car."

There was a pneumatic hiss as pressure released from Breakdown's frame in a rush. His entire face was aflame, cheeks brighter than his optics. "He, uh, we -we just..."

Ratchet held up a hand to stop him from stuttering himself to death. "Just tell me you didn't start performing a conjunx ritus and I won't yell."

"You just said you *don't* yell," Breakdown pointed.

"I don't yell at people who don't *deserve* it," Ratchet clarified. "Stop stalling."

Breakdown looked away, "No. No, he said - he said some stuff about waiting-"

Ratchet was pleasantly surprised. He wondered if he had underestimated this Knock Out-

"And anyways, he said we don't need to be conjunxed to have fun," Breakdown smirked goofily.

Ratchet slapped his palms against his thighs in resignation. "Yeah, I bet he did. Where is he now?"

"The war council."

Ratchet brought up his internal chrono. The Command Trine had left for that over an hour ago now. "Long meeting."

Breakdown nodded, not meeting his optics, "Yeah, there's a lot to discuss I guess. Everyone had to attend."

"You're not," Ratchet pointed out, beginning to feel suspicious with the way Breakdown wasn't meeting his gaze. He stood up, tuning his audials to listen outside the room.

"I did, but I..." Breakdown trailed off. "...They said I could go early."

Ratchet stared at Breakdown. Breakdown swallowed.

An awful feeling began to swarm in the pits of Ratchet's tank.

Without a word he pushed past Breakdown, out the door.

"Hey!" Breakdown called after him. "Wait, where are you going-?!"

Ratchet ignored him, quickening his strides. The corridors were empty. He opened every door he passed to find the rooms much the same. The Air Barracks; deserted. The Rec Rooms; trashed, but empty. He began to run towards the War Chambers, silencing the fuel warning notifications popping up on his HUD, telling him he was at a critical stage of fuel conservation and couldn't afford the excess exertion.

Breakdown was running after him, shouting about how he'd be shot if he barged in on another war

council. How 'they' weren't going to let him keep strutting around like he owned the place if he pushed too far.

Ratchet ignored the warnings because he already knew, when he slapped the access panel for the war chambers and stepped over the threshold, that there was no war council to interrupt.

He was greeted with an empty, cold room, a long table littered with recently discarded documents, a holo-screen projecting attack patterns and targets. Breakdown arrived behind him, out of breath and lying terribly, "I- I guess it finished early-"

"Where are they?" Ratchet whipped around to demand, even though he already knew where they were. Knew that they'd left on a raid, and that Breakdown, as the Decepticon 'closest' to him had been left behind to distract him. Because they knew he'd try to stop them. That he would try to reason with them. That he would have tried to help.

And they plotted and schemed and went anyway.

Ratchet's spark was beating hard enough to burst through it's casing. Every pulse sucking away his energy. Faster and harder.

"Where?" His vocaliser crackled with emotion.

Breakdown met his gaze. His optics were resigned and sad, but there wasn't any regret there. "We're starving, Ratch'."

Ratchet shoved him away and stumbled back out into the corridor, chest aching something fierce. He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. That he'd been dumb enough to take a nap?! This was *Starscream* he was up against. You didn't *sleep* when Starscream was plotting something. And now that damn seeker was going to get people killed. Innocent workers, and heroic Autobots and hapless Decepticons alike.

Wild panic summoned memories of past battles. The very worst of them. Streaks of blaster fire crisscrossing, scorching the ground, the walls, the armour of his friends. Cathartic shouts of rage and desperate cries for help that sounded all the same in the thunderous roar of battle. Frame's mangled so badly he couldn't tell who's energon was all over his hands.

But he wasn't there. There was nothing he could do to help. He had every faith in Optimus's leadership, in Prowl's tactics, and both of their ability to preserve innocent life, but things had gotten twisted up inside of him, his loyalties, his morals.

Would it be so wrong to let their enemy slip away with a few cubes?

"Ratch?" Breakdown was calling him, though he sounded far away.

A hand was under Ratchet's arm, trying to pull him up. He realised then that he had fallen. Past the myriad of sickening panic his HUD was flashing up his last warning notification. His fuel levels had fallen past the point of no return. He was going into stasis.

He tried to struggle, but just ended up slumping in Breakdown's hands.

He couldn't go into stasis. Not now. Not when an entire horde of idiots were out there shooting at each other. He needed to be ready for them, to shout at them, to admonish them, to fix them...

His vision shuttered to red and he felt the heavy sensation of his frame shutting down as he could no longer support his own weight, his helm began to lull-

"S'okay, Ratch," Breakdown's voice was a warmth in the approaching darkness, "-got you..."

What Ratchet was first aware of as he rebooted into consciousness, was a pleasant, gentle fragrance.

It was wax polish, he recognised distantly. The smell reminded him of Sunstreaker -clean and youthful, though the scent was too subtle for something the twin would have worn. Ratchet's optics slitted open, aching and still tinted red from fuel deprivation, and he was met with the mirror shine of impeccable armour.

A handsome angular face appeared above him, and Ratchet groaned in defeat. Knock Out.

"Well, well, well, look who's finally up," the flashy sports car greeted smugly, helm tilted slightly to stick his nose in the air. "You gave poor Breakdown a spark-attack."

"I'm sure he'll live," Ratchet grumbled, squeezing his optics shut again to rid them of lingering redness. His fuel levels were creeping up, slowly, like the return of his recent memories. He pushed a hand to the medberth to push himself upright, and a slight but strong hand urged him down again.

"I'm not done with you," Knock Out glared impatiently.

"Like I give a-"

There was a click and snap of metal and suddenly something cold was resting against the base of Ratchet's neck. He glanced down, and saw Knock Out had transformed his index finger to a scalpel, which was resting along his main fuel line. "I'm. Not. Done."

Ratchet settled back against the berth with a glare. He harrumphed, "You don't have the energon to spare for this."

Knock Out arched an elegant brow, optics flicking towards something on Ratchet's left. "I think you'll find we have more than enough."

Ratchet twisted at the neck to see a healthy stack of full glowing energon cubes. A nauseas, juxtapositional mix of relief and dread filled him. "How-?"

The raid. It had been a success after all. Starscream must have been so slagging proud of himself-

"Was anyone hurt?"

"A few."

"Who?" Ratchet demanded, energon thrumming through his lines. The compulsion to be up and looking through charts, delving into whatever mess they must have left him with, was too strong to ignore. He began to rise, desperate for answers, ignoring the sound of Knock Out transforming his finger into a knife again. He slapped the hand away, fierce with his anger, "Who was-?"

Then he saw him.

Vortex. Laid out across a metal slab. Still and dark. He had been shot in the head. Ratchet could see the entrance wound from where he lay. A small, neat hole the width of a pinky finger. The exit

wound on what remained of the other side of Vortex's helm had blown out half of his processor. It's shattered remains were laid out in jagged pieces around his helm -a grim halo of broken, warped parts.

Only the spark chamber open and hooked up to the electro-gram told Ratchet he was still alive.

Ratchet remembered the first dreadful day here. Remembered how stupid, foolish Sideswipe had tried to rescue him, and how terribly that had backfired for them both. It felt like months had passed now, since he'd watched Vortex slam Sideswipe's head against the reinforced steel doorway. Again. And again.

Ratchet wondered who had taken the shot. If it had been Sideswipe, in revenge. If it had been Sunstreaker, in vengeance.

Ratchet didn't much like Vortex for plenty of reasons (that first impression being the most of them), but seeing him broken in pieces didn't fill Ratchet with any great sense of satisfaction for 'justice' having been done. All he felt was sick. Sick at the thought of Vortex's gestalt, who were bound to be stood out in the hallway, wringing their hands together and worrying over him. Because in the Decepticons, even a sociopath like Vortex was loved.

"Looks worse than it is," Knock Out spoke into the hanging silence. "Won't be an easy fix -we'll need parts from Cybertron- but he'll keep till then."

"I'll help you with him," Ratchet didn't look away from Vortex's lifeless face.

Knock Out laughed, "I don't think I need-"

"Yes you do," Ratchet cut him off with a hard glare. He glanced at his fuel levels -fifty percent. "It's good enough," he gestured to the line feeding energon into his frame. "Let me up."

They were celebrating, and Ratchet couldn't fault them for it. It was the first decent meal they'd had in weeks and as far as they were concerned the only casualty had been a few of Vortex's brain cells- of which he hadn't had many to begin with.

A few of the seekers tried to draw Ratchet into their celebrations, too grateful and high for their rare victory to remember he wasn't one of them. He would wonder later why he wasn't mad at them all, but for now his mind was far away, distracted by worries of what had happened on that battlefield.

He found himself looking at hands- knuckles, searching for the paint of his friends, trying to piece together who had fought who, who might have gotten off worse. Ramjet had a yellow scuff across the top of his helm and streaks of mud on his knees, and Ratchet wondered if Bumblebee had been stupid enough to launch himself at the seekers again. There was a clean cut across Motormaster's thigh that could have come from Optimus's axe. Slipstream had a cracked optic that someone had clearly gotten close enough to punch.

He let Nova Storm guide him into one of the Rec Rooms, excitedly telling him about a drink she'd invented all while Acid Storm jokingly warned him off consuming any poison his well-meaning trine-mate concocted. He shouldn't have been there, but there was a restless energy running through his chest that wouldn't let him rest until he'd seen everyone, and knew for sure no one was hiding injuries any more serious than a few broken fingers.

"Ratchet?" Dirge met them at the door, surprising Ratchet simply for the fact that he was up and

about and not hiding from the world beneath berth sheets. He looked worried, but seeing as he *always* looked that way Ratchet didn't think much of it. "I heard you ... *collapsed*."

Ratchet scowled, embarrassment creeping in, not helped by Dirge's shameful whisper, "I got better. Sorry to disappoint-"

"You shouldn't be here," Dirge was looking at Nova Storm and Acid Storm when he spoke.

Ratchet was about to be offended- when he noticed the unhealthy glow of radiative gold at the far end of the Rec Room, emanating from behind a group of amused looking seekers. Ratchet recognised the exaggerated rise and fall of Sunstorm's self-important voice as the seeker preached at his audience.

Ratchet rolled his optics, "What terrible advice is he giving now?"

"Ratchet, wait-" Dirge tried to stop him.

Ratchet brushed off his hand and stomped closer. Skywarp was there with Thundercracker, snickering behind his hand. When he noticed Ratchet the humour vanished, all colour draining from his face. He spilled his drink down Thundercracker. "What are *you* doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in a coma?!"

Ratchet opened his mouth to respond, when Sunstorm's words began to register.

"-is with us. Working in the minds of your leaders and the sparks of our finest warriors, striking down the undeserving and the blasphemous," Sunstorm crooned, lifting a cube full of energon towards the ceiling, like he was toasting to Primus-

"-just talking slag as always, Ratch," Skywarp had him by the shoulders and was trying to turn him away, "Don't listen to-"

"He gave us this victory like he gave us today's heroes," Sunstorm smiled. "Bringing Deadlock to us in our time of need, guiding the path of his blaster bolt when it struck the Autobot Bluestreak through the spark-"

Skywarp's hands on his shoulders were tight enough to dent the thick armour, but it still wasn't enough to stop Ratchet surging forward, knocking the seekers between him and the sparkless, golden hate-monger aside.

Sunstorm lowered his cube to drink from it, and saw Ratchet. And smiled.

"Ah, medic, I see you've come to-"

Heat enveloped Ratchet, but he couldn't tell what was anger surging through his fuel lines like a live thing and what was poisonous radiation burning the outer layers of his armour.

He decked Sunstorm, but didn't feel the impact of the solid punch as the sensors in his knuckles had already burnt out and died inches from Sunstorm's perfect, deadly face. His entire hand and forearm was on fire, literally, smelted and burnt, dripping molten armour and blackened plastic.

Ratchet barely noticed the pain. Sunstorm had fallen to the floor, clutching his face, energon spreading across his cheeks from his broken nasal plate.

Skywarp dragged him back before he could do more. Thundercracker was desperately wrapping his arm in a fire retardant tarp, trying to save what was left of the now bare, skeletal limb.

"Primus didn't give you a gift, he gave you a *curse*," Ratchet spat at him, lifting his arm to show him the damage done just by being in his proximity, refusing to let himself be drawn away. "You're toxic. You're *poison*. You do *this* to people. On the inside and out. You'll *kill* everything you'll ever touch."

Sunstorm's large golden optics stared up at him from the floor, wide and frightened. Ratchet's lip curled in disgust. "Nothing about today is worth giving thanks to. And nothing about *Deadlock* deserves praise."

"Ratchet," Thundercracker tightened the tarp around his arm with a harsh yank to get his attention. "Let's go. Repair bay."

Ratchet pulled his arm free and looked away from Sunstorm, nodding stiffly. Skywarp and Thundercracker trailed after him, clearly not trusting him to get there by himself.

Ratchet glanced back over his shoulder before crossing the threshold, wanting to throw one last glare Sunstorm's way.

Sunstorm was still sat on the floor, trying to stem the copious flow of energon dripping down his face. The seekers surrounding him were watching uncomfortably. None of them moved forward to help him up. None of them could.

Ratchet was halfway down the corridor before he had to stop and cover his face in his hands, one cold and clammy, the other hot, warped metal.

Skywarp wrapped his arms around him from behind and squeezed him in a hug so tight and enthusiastic Ratchet didn't have the spark to push him away. Back in the Rec Room, no one would be hugging Sunstorm.

3am Heart To Hearts

Confined to quarters.

Ratchet didn't think he'd ever been confined to quarters. Either because he had never done anything to warrant it, or more likely because Optimus wouldn't have *dared*. He had never had to endure the cringing insult that was being sent to his room like a naughty child.

By Ratchet's understanding it had been Starscream's orders. That wasn't a surprise. Soundwave would have sent him to the brig. Megatron might have taken it a step further and had him shot, seeing as he was no longer any use as a medic to them. It was strange to think of the manic seeker as the more lenient of the three. He could only assume Skywarp and Thundercracker had something to do with it.

The alternative could be Starscream was secretly grateful someone had finally found a way to shut Sunstorm up.

And that was all assuming this was the full extent of his punishment. There could be a full complement of special interrogators outside his door, just waiting for the order to enter and take his processor apart for intel.

Ratchet glanced at the useless stump that was his right hand, what remained of his circuitry wrapped up in tarp and foam insulation. A medic's hands weren't something that came off a factory line. And Knock Out, by his own admission, had never finished his training.

He had been an idiot to let himself lose his temper like that. He should have known better than to sink his fist into a face oozing radiation. Even if that face had been begging for it.

What a wasted opportunity. If anyone was worth serving a sentence of isolation for punching, it was Deadlock.

Something clunked out in the hallway and an out of tune beep sounded as the door was unlocked. Ratchet's chrono read 0300 hours, a frighteningly early hour for someone to be making a friendly visit.

Sat on the floor besides his berth, he nudged himself up against the wall, fear jolting through his circuits at the possibility that he really had underestimated his punishment. Sunstorm was one of Starscream's after all, and the Air Commander was not forgiving.

His fears were confirmed when it was indeed Starscream who swept into the cramped little room. Ember-warm optics glanced at the un-slept in berth before falling to Ratchet on the floor. His lip curled.

Ratchet had already braced himself, "Go on then. Shoot me."

Starscream's lifted his hands to his hips, "Oh, how very dramatic."

"I'm dramatic?" Ratchet barked, waving his stump about. "It's three in the morning! Of course you're here to shoot me. What else could prise you out of your lover's arms?!"

"Do not call him that, *thank you*," Starscream's nose crinkled unhappily. "And for future reference, if I had been awarded the coveted task of shooting an unarmed prisoner of war, I would at least make a show of it. I wouldn't slip into your cell in the middle of the night like it was some

shameful duty. Like your friend Deadlock wou-"

Pain jarred Ratchet's spark. "He's not my friend."

Starscream paused, "...Are you sure?"

"He's a murderer," Ratchet used his good hand to push himself off the floor to stand. "He's made it clear that all he is to me is a mistake I shouldn't have made."

Starscream tutted quietly, casually moving further into the room. Ratchet watched him pause beside the berth. He brushed it down before sitting on it gingerly. "Your little Autobot friend survived."

Ratchet stared. Starscream met his gaze emotionlessly.

With a heavy exhale Ratchet dropped to the berth beside him. Starscream inched away so there was appropriate space between them. Ratchet didn't care about their proximity. He felt wrung out like a used wash cloth.

"Bluestreak's alive?"

Starscream made a flippant gesture with his hand, "Strange, isn't it. I've never known Deadlock to miss..."

"Is he alright?" Ratchet stared down at the hand (and stump) resting in his lap. His fingers shook so he curled them into a fist. "Blue?"

"From what Ravage could see he'll be perfectly fine," Starscream sounded a tad grumpy. "Which is *just* what we need, indestructible Autobots-"

"Now you know how we feel every time you keep getting back up," Ratchet elbowed him lightly, feeling stupidly giddy. "No one else was hurt?"

"Just your Prime's pride," Starscream rubbed his side where Ratchet had elbowed him, looking confused at the camaraderie. "He was distracted. I don't think he's been taking care of himself."

Ratchet scowled, feelings of reassurance slipping away. "Why would you say that to me?"

"I'm only telling you the truth," Starscream acted insulted, as if 'truth telling' was an activity he regularly partook in. "You're more important to your friends than I think you realise. The Autobots need a tyrant of a medic like we need Soundwave."

Ratchet did a double take at the admission, wondering who had body snatched Starscream. "You hate Soundwave."

"I hate Soundwave on principle. I also know we need him. You don't think I wouldn't have gotten rid of him already if I didn't know how vital he was to this operation? I could have killed Megatron centuries ago if it weren't for his meddling."

Ratchet smirked, "And just think, without that meddling you would have killed your best chance at happiness before you even realised how *perfect* you were for each other."

"Revolting," Starscream sneered, "Let me make this clear to you, Megatron has *two* uses- his slightly above average performance in berth, and the coding that I will one day require to create perfect heirs to carry on my legacy."

"Of course, how stupid of me," Ratchet muttered. "You know you could cut out the middleman and have Shockwave clone you an heir?"

Starscream barked out a sharp laugh, "And end up with another Sunstorm?! I'll pass."

Sunstorm. Ratchet felt a wave of guilt cut through him, sobering his mood. His memory banks conjured up the image of large orbs of gold, staring up at him in fright.

He swallowed. "...Is he alright?"

Starscream was studying his claws, expression bored. "Who?"

"Sunstorm," Ratchet laid his hand over his stump. "I should apologise to him."

Starscream's optics rolled towards the ceiling, "Don't. It was about time someone hit him."

Ratchet shook his helm. "I said things I shouldn't have said."

"Ah yes," Starscream nodded, "About him being an irredeemable monster, I heard. Not necessarily untrue."

"...He's not a monster. He's not irredeemable." Ratchet shuttered his optics with a sigh. "No one deserves to live like he has to."

"He likes it," Starscream was infuriatingly ignorant.

"He can't *possibly*-"

"Well *I* certainly wouldn't mind being an unstoppable force of radiative power."

Oh course he wouldn't.

"Even if it meant no one could ever touch you?" Ratchet asked.

"As far as I'm concerned, that's a plus."

"Big talk for a seeker with finger smudges all over his wings," Ratchet eyed him, smirking when Starscream dropped his wings out of view with a grimace of embarrassment.

The seeker folded his arms stubbornly, looking away, "Well I'm sure I would figure something out."

"Like what? Having Megatron frag you in a radiation suit? How's that gonna work, when you didn't even want to use the contraception I gave you-"

"I am *warning* you," Starscream pointed at him, optics blazing. "You bring up that old fool, *one more time*-"

Ratchet threw up his hands, "Alright, fine! Sensitive subject. I'll leave it alone."

Starscream squinted at him like he knew full well Ratchet would never leave it alone. He was right. The weird not-relationship between Decepticon High Command wasn't just hypnotically entertaining with it's endless dysfunction, it was *leverage*. If they truly meant anything to one another, it meant they cared about something other than war. It meant they might be able to see beyond their scorched earth tactics. It meant there could be room for compromise. For negotiations. For peace talks.

Bluestreak could have died today. Vortex could have died today. Both of them shot by people ...by people that Ratchet cared about. The Autobots were struggling without him. The Decepticons were in self-destructive tatters as it was. This was what was left of their civilisation. Fighting over the last scraps.

"This has to stop, Starscream."

Starscream glanced at him with a cocked brow. "What, Megatron and I? It's just sex, Ratchet, it doesn't mean-"

"Not you and bucket head! The war!" Ratchet stood up. "You're not tired of this? Vortex is in the repair bay with his head blown open-"

Starscream scoffed, "He'll live-"

"He might never be the same!" Ratchet yelled, looming over him. "Don't you understand that?! We brush off damage and injuries because we're a notoriously difficult species to kill. Stab wounds don't mean much. Bullet holes can be patched up. Limbs can be replaced," he held up his own arm sarcastically. "And processors can be pieced back together. But it leaves *scars*. Vortex will lose fifty percent of his memory banks. My hand will *never* have the same dexterity it once did-"

"At least you *have* hands," Starscream said pointedly. "Not all of my comrades have that same privilege."

"I'm not saying the actions of the council were justified. Empurata was-"

"The preferred punishment for political dissidents," Starscream interrupted. "A punishment carried out by *Autobot* Security enforcers-"

"The council is gone, Starscream. You killed them all."

Starscream leaned back on his hands, "And what do you think of that, medic? Do you think it was justified?"

Ratchet was silent. He wouldn't be baited.

"We have long since passed the point of no return," Starscream continued quietly, meeting his gaze fearlessly. "I have done too much to ever be accepted back into decent society -or whatever Autobot version of that we would inevitably end up in. I have committed unspeakable crimes. So has Megatron. So has Soundwave. So has Skywarp, who you've become oh so fond of-"

"We've all done terrible things," Ratchet interrupted. "No one is blameless anymore. But this isn't going to get any easier. Today it was Vortex. What about tomorrow? Who's going to be next? Who else needs to have their head blown open for you to realise there's still a long way to go to get to rock bottom? It can always get worse."

Starscream looked down.

"What about your trine?" Ratchet said louder. "What if next time it's Thundercracker? Or Skywarp? What if next time it's Megatron?"

Starscream was quiet for a moment. "...I told you not to bring him up."

"He's a difficult subject to avoid."

Starscream stood up from the berth. "I am finished listening to your ludicrous ramblings."

"Well I'm *not* finished!" Ratchet moved around him and blocked the door. Starscream lazily lifted his nullray, giving him a bored look.

Ratchet was unmoved. "Put it down. You're not going to shoot me."

Starscream activated the weapon, brows drawing down. "Aren't I?"

"You like me too much to shoot me," Ratchet tipped his chin up.

"I happen to shoot people I like frequently," Starscream scoffed.

Ratchet tilted his head with a wry smile, "So is this you admitting that you do like Megatron?"

"Shut up!" Starscream snapped, sounding flustered. "And get out of the way. It's four in the morning, for Primus's sake-"

"You came here!" Ratchet protested, "if anyone's any right to complain about the hour it's me."

"Well *excuse me* for being considerate enough to put you out of your miserable grief. Next time I'll let you stew a few days before telling you someone you love isn't dead."

Ratchet was about to continue the argument, when a thought struck him. He took a step back, taking Starscream in with a new sense of realisation. "Why *did* Soundwave bother to send Ravage to the Ark so early in the morning? Nothing worth spying on happens till the shift starts."

"He didn't. I sent Ravage."

"I knew it," Ratchet leaned towards him in interest. "You sent Ravage to discover what condition Bluestreak was in, and then came running down here in the middle of the night to tell me he was okay. Starscream, you *do* have a spark."

Starscream blinked, realising he'd just been caught being more thoughtful than he wanted anyone ever realising he could be. "...I didn't come *running*-"

"Thank you," Ratchet's gaze softened. "For looking out for me."

Starscream sneered and backed away, "Oh stop it. You're making too much of this. I was awake anyway. And I was hardly going to go back to the Command Quarters and put myself at Megatron's mercy after what you did to him."

Ratchet folded his arms, "It can't be that bad."

"He's been making far too much eye contact," Starscream shuddered. "And what kind freak kisses someone's forehead?!"

"Funny," Ratchet checked his chrono, hiding a smirk with a duck of his head. "Since those side-affects will have worn off hours ago now."

Starscream looked panicked. "You mean this is permanent?!"

"What I *mean* is that this has nothing to do with any programming alterations." Ratchet thought it was funny how young Starscream's blush made him look. "I think you actually have something with him. If the war did end now, you wouldn't have any excuse not to settle down with him-"

"Stop it."

"-create a few heirs and raise them in domestic bliss together, instead of moulding them into the perfect weapons of war-"

"I said-" Starscream grabbed him by the front of his chest plate and hauled him in close, "-stop it. Unless you're inviting me to speculate over what sort of future you and *Deadlock* might have together?"

Something dropped like a stone to the bottom of Ratchet fuel tank. "What did you say?"

Starscream grinned nastily, "So you can dish it out, but you can't take it?"

Ratchet slapped Starscream's hand away. "There's nothing- I don't-"

"Deadlock doesn't miss," Starscream cut him off, circling back to his first point. "Not unless he wants to."

"*That's* what you're basing this off?!"

"No. I'm basing it off the constipated face you pull whenever someone mentions him. The way he gets all *soft* when you walk in the room. How emotional you are about him, acting like he's committed some great betrayal every time he has the audacity to follow orders." Starscream scowled, "You are *ruining* one of our best warriors with your shameless flirting-"

"***Flirting?!'***" Ratchet roared.

"Oh please," Starscream scoffed. "I see you smiling at him."

"I smile at everyone!"

"You never smile at me."

"Why would I smile at you when all you ever do is make me *miserable*," Ratchet hissed menacingly, hands (hand) clenched in front of his face with his overwhelming sense of defensive stress. "If you want me to smile at you start acting like decent member of society."

"Funny how those conditions don't apply to *Deadlock*," Starscream folded his arms. "*He's* never been a decent member of society a day in his life. *I* used to be a respected member of the scientific community before..." Starscream trailed off with a wave of his hand. "Megatron gave Deadlock a purpose. If it wasn't for us, your little junkie friend would have overdosed in the gutter a millennia ago."

Ratchet's lip curled, "You don't know anything about him."

"Oh and you do?" Starscream tilted his head. "A moment ago he was nothing but a mistake to you."

Ratchet felt cold at the reminder. Drift was a ...complication, but he wasn't a mistake. It was clear to him now the haze of grief and anger had evaporated. No one was beyond help. Not Drift. And not Sunstorm.

"What did you do to him?" He asked, "To turn him into ...this."

Starscream blew air past his lips loudly, "I didn't do anything to him. He was like that when I met him."

"And how did you meet him?" Ratchet braced his hands (hand) on his hip, feeling trepidation at what he might hear. Did he even want to know? Something about Starscream's smug attitude told him he didn't.

His instincts were right. Starscream's mouth twitched and shifted until it settled into a light smirk. "Let's just say we were both ...'favourites' for a time."

Ratchet's processor stalled on the idea of what the *Hell* that meant, and it gave Starscream ample opportunity to finally slip by him and squeeze through the doorway.

"Hey!" He shouted, but Starscream had already sealed and locked the door behind him. Ratchet slammed his fist against the metal and heard a fading cackle from the other side as Starscream walked away.

Of course. He was still confined to quarters. He'd just have to wait until Starscream deigned to visit him again to continue their argument. Or discussion. Or ...whatever this had been.

And him and Drift? Together?! Deluded seeker. In *what* universe would that have worked out...

Hate-Flirting

According to Ratchet's chrono, they let him stew another thirteen hours before someone higher up finally took pity on him. He heard the clunk and following *ping* of the door unlocking and stood pre-emptively, dragging a hand over his face to rub away the sting of his tired optics.

The door rolled across it's track with an unhealthy groan and shudder to reveal a very Drift-like silhouette.

Anger Ratchet had naively thought abated licked across his spark. He almost sat down again in protest.

It was nice to see that Drift's silhouetted shape didn't have the ball-bearings to enter the room. The assassin's helm dropped in well deserved shame, shutters falling across his optics. His voice was quiet when he spoke, "I realise you likely hate me now-"

"I don't hate you," Ratchet said over him, folding his arms. "But I'm not in the mood to talk with you either. So if you've come to grovel-"

"I don't grovel," Drift cut him off sharply in return, his soft regretful tone transmuting into something more expected of a remorseless Decepticon. "And I'm not here to talk. You've been summoned by Megatron. I'd like to not keep him waiting."

Ratchet planted his pedes and remained in place, just to be contrary. "I hardly think it'll do him any harm to practice a little patience. There's no rush."

Drift pinned him with a look. "I thought you didn't want to talk?"

"*With* you," Ratchet pointed, "But I can talk *at* you-"

"Only if I choose to listen."

"Then I'll be happy to make sure you *hear* every word!" Ratchet raised his voice to something just shy of a shout. "You shot my friend. You aimed a gun at his spark and you shot him."

"I shot at the enemy," Drift countered calmly. "He survived, thanks to me."

"Thanks to you?! Remove *you* from the equation and he never would have been shot at all."

"What would you have had me do?" Drift took a sudden step forward, optics sharpened to slits as his cool disposition slipped, "Bluestreak is a better marksman. I had to defend myself; it was him or me."

Ratchet looked away, face scrunched up in displeasure, "He wouldn't have shot *you* in the spark."

"No, he would have aimed for the head," Drift turned and stalked back through the doorway, "Who do you think shot Vortex?"

Ratchet trailed behind Deadlock as the assassin led him towards the throne room, a strut-deep sense of exhaustion robbing him of the buzz of energy that had been driving him mad inside the tiny cell-like room after his first decent refuel in weeks. His entire frame felt heavy, weighed down by something. Ahead of him Deadlock's armoured back was tight and knotted with tension as he marched through the base, clearly no more keen on Ratchet's company than Ratchet was on his.

Deadlock stopped outside a tall set doors and turned to stand with his back to the bulkhead beside it, chin up and at attention. Ratchet hesitated a moment, glancing at the access panel; green for unlocked.

"He's not going to kill me, is he?" He wondered aloud.

Drift's head snapped to him, optics soft but vehement as he shook his head. "No. I wouldn't let-" he cut himself off, clearing his vocaliser and focusing on the bulkhead. "...Don't keep him waiting."

Ratchet pressed the panel and stepped inside.

The throne room was an empty, opulent waste of space. A long walkway stretched from the door all the way up to a dais where the high-backed seat sat. Whatever Ratchet had imagined of the coveted Decepticon throne, the dull, unembellished metal seat Megatron was currently slouched in paled in comparison to it. It was plain, utterly un-regal, and void of luxury. The back rest was topped with a scowling Decepticon insignia- it's only feature- the purple paint faded and chipped at the corners. The seat wasn't even padded.

Megatron stirred in it with a dirty creak of ancient iron, tipping his chin up in a silent, lazy beckon.

Ratchet sighed and began the prolonged, awkward march down the walkway to the bottom of the throne.

Megatron was alone, and Ratchet realised, with a growing sense of discomfort, that he was out of practice dealing with the Decepticon High Commander without his little seeker sidekick buzzing around besides him. Starscream's absence seemed to darken Megatron's presence. The air felt still and heavy as his footsteps echoed on the walkway. He realised he had come to rely on Starscream's incessant snarking to help muffle Megatron's unchallenged intimidation.

He came to a stop at Megatron's feet and glared up defensively. "Well?"

""Well" indeed," Megatron's peered down at him. "Curb the attitude, or I'll invite Sunstorm in to melt it off the other hand."

Ratchet was coming to learn that Megatron was more bark than bite. Starscream was living proof of that.

He smirked, unafraid, "And what good would I be to you then?"

"Precisely," Megatron said darkly. "You're being spared, this time, because you've become something of an asset to us. But I will not tolerate anything of this nature again. Do I make myself clear?"

Ratchet shuddered at being referred to as a Decepticon asset. "Sure," he sighed, shoulders lifting in a disrespectful shrug to show he wasn't intimidated by the act. Megatron's menace had *nothing* on Optimus's disappointment. He began to turn, "I guess I'll be on my way then-"

"On one condition," Megatron stopped him. Ratchet cringed and glanced back. "And what would that be?"

Megatron gripped the arms of the throne and leant forward, "You will cease your incessant harassment of my second in command."

Ratchet's mouth dropped open like the hinges had failed. "...Starscream *tattled* on me?!"

Megatron's frown deepened unhappily, "Don't be so infantile. Starscream bears a great deal of responsibility but is prone to distraction. *You* are exacerbating that."

"Exacerbating, my aft," Ratchet snorted. "Just get over yourself and admit you're telling me to stop picking on your boyfriend."

"Buoy-Friend?" Megatron repeated with such profound confusion Ratchet's mouth quirked into a smile.

"Boyfriend," he elaborated, just for the fun of watching the great warlord before him squirm. "An Earth noun for a regular romantic companion. Haven't you been on this planet long enough now to know the lingo?"

"I'll thank you not to use vile humanisms when referring to my Second," Megatron growled, always so hilariously chivalrous when it came to Starscream. "And no, unlike your Prime I have not lowered myself by coming into regular contact with the insects infesting this planet."

"They're not 'infesting' the planet if they live here."

"Starscream is right," Megatron grumbled darkly, gaze flitting away in resignation, "You have grown far too confident for a prisoner."

"And that's another thing," Ratchet began, deciding that if Megatron had let him run his mouth for this long without shooting him, he could risk pushing it a little further. Probably. "I think I've been here long enough."

Megatron was silent.

Ratchet swallowed, "I need to go back. Back home. To the Ark."

Megatron considered him coldly, "And I would like to return to a Cybertron under my absolute rule. But we can't always have what we want."

"Let me go," Ratchet took a step up into the dais supporting the throne so Megatron wasn't looming over him quite so superiorly. Megatron blinked at Ratchet's boldness as if he'd just been slapped around the face.

"You don't need me anymore. My hand is-" Ratchet stopped, struggling to finish the sentence. "I'm not going to be much good to you. Not like this. No better than Knock Out anyway."

Megatron shook his head. "You don't honestly believe you can negotiate your own freedom? Your episode with Sunstorm must have scrambled your circuits."

"If I can't make you see reason then get the Ark on the communicator and trade me."

The arch of Megatron's raised brow had an unexpectedly aristocratic hint to it for a former pit-dweller -something he must have picked up from Starscream. "They have nothing we want."

"They have *everything* you want. Parts. Fuel. *Leak proof ceilings*. You can use me to negotiate a ceasefire," he implored.

"Why would we do that?"

"Because this is exhausting and pointless."

Megatron snorted. "Tell that to your Prime."

"*You* tell it to him!" Ratchet snapped. "He doesn't want this anymore than you do, Megatron! None of us do! The only reason this has dragged on for so long is because no one is prepared to admit it! To be willing to change! To-"

Megatron's fist slammed against the armrest of the throne with a heavy clang, silencing him. Ratchet took a unbalanced step back, remembering suddenly who he was talking to.

"Your optimism might have been inspiring if you weren't so tragically delusional," he said, distaste clear in his tone. "Your ranks are filled with the high-caste. The privileged. Scholars, and scientists, and *medics*. I have war builds and labourers, and I have it on good authority a great many of them cannot even read basic neocybex, let alone write it. What is going to happen to them after this ceasefire you're proposing? What are they going to do with themselves? What are they going to have when I abandon everything they have sacrificed, everything they have ever fought for, because I felt a brief moment of disillusionment?"

"You're such a theatrical waste of metal, I'm not asking you to *forfeit*!" Ratchet snapped. "That's what negotiation is for. It's a *compromise*! And no, you probably *won't* get to sit on a hideous throne and lord over a dying planet if you enter into peace talks, but if you can live with the idea of cooperating with Optimus instead of mounting his head on a pike, those illiterate warriors you have so little faith in can move on with their lives. You can finally give them something like the future you promised them. Wasn't that the point of all this?!"

Megatron was glaring silently. Ratchet stepped back down off the dais, sucking in a deep breath and finding himself stunned to have made it through the whole rant without being throttled once.

"Call Optimus," he said, turning away. "Talk to him for Primus's sake, or so help me I'll *make* you talk."

Drift didn't ask him what he'd discussed with Megatron, only casting a scrutinising optic over his frame before wordlessly leading him back the way they'd come, towards the repair bay. Ratchet again found himself conflicted over how angry he should be with him, and how much longer he could justify that feeling.

"Starscream said something interesting to me," he said casually, the words rising up out of his vocaliser before caution could stop them.

Drift glanced over a curved shoulder plate. "...When did you speak to him?"

"This morning."

Drift stopped in his tracks, frown hardening his expression further. "Why?"

Ratchet didn't like the demanding tone he was using.

"We were having a *sleepover*," he muttered sarcastically, and to irk Drift further, didn't elaborate. He probably wouldn't be doing Starscream any favours if he started rumours that the fearsome second in command did have the capacity for kindness -towards an Autobot, no less- so he wasn't doing it just to be contrary. "He mentioned you."

Drift started walking again, looking away. "I wouldn't take anything he said to spark. We've never seen optic-to-optic."

"Oh, well now I'm dying of curiosity," Ratchet sped up to try and draw level with Drift, get a look at his expression. "Because he said-"

"He's a liar," Drift said suddenly. "Remember."

"You don't know what he told me yet."

"What did he say?"

"Why? What are you trying to hide?"

Drift made a noise of overwrought frustration, "Ratchet..."

"You didn't 'face him, did you?" Ratchet peered at him, amused by Drift's reaction to the teasing. Then when Drift didn't immediately answer, Ratchet grew concerned. "You-? You *didn't*, did you?!"

"What does it matter?" Drift's crinkled optics swung to meet his.

"It doesn't matter at all," Ratchet agreed sharply, looking away. "...But just for curiosities sake?"

Drift's mouth pressed into a hard thin line. "No," he finally answered, "I have never interfaced with *Starscream*."

Ratchet breathed a sigh of relief -before his suspicions heightened again at the specific wording. "Why did you say it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you're omitting something," Ratchet pointed. "You never fragged *Starscream* -that's what you just said. You don't go putting emphasis on random names without hinting at some other meaning."

"You've been down here too long," Drift said dismissively. "You're starting to think like a Con."

Ratchet had a lot to say to *that* uncalled for insult, but unfortunately by that point they had arrived at the repair bay. Slipstream was outside waiting, leaning against the doorway with an expression of mild curiosity at their conversation. Drift's optics flicked between her and Ratchet. "We're here," he said, as if Ratchet hadn't noticed, gesturing for him to go in.

Ratchet stubbornly crossed his arms, "I'll go in there and let Knock Out poke and prod at my melted husk of a hand only if you answer the question."

"Why don't you take your own advice," Drift turned to walk away, not at all willing to negotiate on the matter. "And actually start taking care of yourself before worrying about everyone else."

Ratchet glared at his retreating back, grumbling unhappily under his breath.

As soon as Drift had rounded the corner and was safely out of audio range, Slipstream's shadow fell over him. Ratchet stiffened in concern. "Can I *help* you?"

Slipstream leaned in, "Maybe. Or maybe I can help you? I happen to know all the juicy little details revolving around Starscream and Deadlock's frenemy-ship."

Ratchet twisted at the neck to meet her devious gaze. "Since when were you a gossip?"

"It pays to be informed around here," she said lightly. "But it's not gossip, it's information, and I'm not about to give it to you for free."

Ratchet highly doubted it would be worth whatever she wanted, but he rolled his optics and gave in nonetheless, "What do you want?"

"A favour," she was suddenly serious. "Sunstorm has locked himself in the elevator of the tower: fried the controls with his radiation we think. I'd be more than happy to let him sulk in there forever, but..." She clicked her tongue. "Nova's worried about him, and it *is* the only way to reach the surface. The Conehead's want to take a flight and they've been bitching all morning-"

"This sounds like Starscream's problem," Ratchet tried to shove down his guilt, knowing Sunstorm's mood was more likely than not a consequence of his actions.

"There's no way in Unicron's Pit Starscream can know about this," Slipstream looked away. "Sunstorm's not done any harm. Yet. But this doesn't need to turn into something ugly. And Starscream has a unique talent for that. Nova ...she just wants to make sure he's alright."

Ratchet inhaled deeply. He was going to regret this. He lifted a hand gesturing for her to go ahead, "Lead on."

She peered at him quizzically, "Don't you want to hear Deadlock's dirty little secret first?"

"It can wait," Ratchet grumbled. "Sunstorm probably can't."

The hallway leading to the tower entrance was occupied by several Decepticons; an impatient Conehead trine, concerned Rainmakers, and Buzzsaw, who was perched in the rafters overlooking the incident, and was probably just a few minutes away from losing patience with the whole thing and informing Soundwave. Which would probably result in a visit from the dreaded Air Commander.

As Ratchet approached, Nova Storm was the only one durable enough to get close to the elevator doors. She was speaking into the seam, where a golden stream of radioactive light was seeping through. Even if they could get Sunstorm out, the elevator wouldn't be habitable for at least several hours. Sunstorm had completely soaked his surroundings in his toxicity.

"-feel better if you just come out, Sunny," she was speaking softly, her voice barely above a whisper. She laid a hand on the door. "I know you don't want to see anyone right now-"

"How long has he been in there?" Ratchet muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

"All night," Thrust said crossly, glaring hatefully at the door.

Ratchet swallowed heavily. That would be since they'd had their 'disagreement' then. "Did anyone fix his nose?"

"No one *can*, remember," Ion Storm reminded him, looking a little resentful at his presence.

"Shut up, Ion Storm," Slipstream glared. "He doesn't need fixing. He has a hyperactive self-repair system. He's good as new in there."

"Of course he is," Ratchet muttered under his breath. On the upside, that was one one less thing to feel guilty about.

Up in the rafters Buzzsaw shifted with a squawk. Nova Storm glanced up at the cassette, worry etched into her features. "Sunny?" she tried again. "If you just talk to me we can try and make it better?"

"Nova, your hand," Acidstorm interrupted with a note of urgency.

Ratchet looked at it. The neon yellow paint of the hand Nova Storm had resting against the door had began to bubble and burn. Which meant Sunstorm was giving off a great deal more radiation than was usual for him outside of a combat situation. Ratchet and most of the seekers took a step back.

Acidstorm reached to pull Nova Storm away, but she stayed.

"I didn't mind," she said, but let her hand fall away from the door so it wouldn't end up looking like Ratchet's. "Sunny, I'm not going anywhere okay. You don't have to push us away."

"Something's wrong with him," Ratchet murmured, an eery sensation of disconcertion growing in his spark. The air around him felt strange, charged, and not just with radiation.

Slipstream shot him a look. "No kidding-"

"Up here," Ratchet clarified, pointing at his head.

"Yeah, *no kidding*," Slipstream repeated heatedly. She nudged him forward. "You're a medic, aren't you?"

"Not that kind of medic-"

"Do you want his radiation to eat through the bulkheads and flood this entire base?"

Ratchet bit down a curse and gingerly approached the door. Nova Storm frowned at him for a moment before stepping aside. Ratchet made sure to keep to a safer distance than her. He cleared his vocaliser awkwardly. "Sunstorm?"

No answer.

"Sunstorm, it's me," He repeated louder, hyperconscious of the Decepticons behind him listening to his every word. "I- I just wanted to say that -I'm sorry."

The silence emanating from the elevator was unsettlingly heavy.

"It wasn't right. What I said to you. And I'd take it back if I could," he licked his lips as he searched for the words. "I want to help you, Sunstorm, so if you just come out of there so we can talk-"

Finally, something stirred behind the doors. Ratchet stopped and listened, relief beginning to ease the weight in his spark. But the doors didn't slide open. There was a clunk, a groan of metal and a staggered whirl, then the sound of the elevator activating and rising towards the surface. Ratchet watched the golden light fade away as Sunstorm took his radiative glow with him.

"Well," Slipstream broke the silence, looking around at them all. "At least he'll be out of the elevator."

Ramjet, claustrophobic and frustrated from spending hours trapped indoors, flipped her a rude

gesture.

"I suppose I ought to keep up my end of the bargain."

Ratchet's mind was elsewhere, distracted, stuck on Sunstorm's silence inside that elevator. When had he never known that idiot to be so quiet.

"Autobot?"

Slipstream, nudged his shoulder and yanked Ratchet from his musing. He shook his head in frustration. "What?" He snapped.

"That gossip I promised you?" Slipstream reminded him.

"Oh," Ratchet stared at the floor, unsure if he even cared anymore. "Yeah."

"It was Megatron."

"Hmm," Ratchet hummed, still distracted. "What was Megatron?"

"Who Deadlock slept with."

Ratchet walked another three steps before the information came down on him like a hammer. He stumbled in shock. "*He slept with-?!'*"

"Stop shouting!" Slipstream snapped. "It's was a only a fling."

Ratchet had to grip the wall to stop himself toppling over in shock. Drift? With *Megatron*?! How horrible. No wonder he'd been so taken in by Decepticon rhetoric if Megatron had focused so much of his own personal attention on him.

"It wasn't like that," Slipstream cut through his fears like she had known what they were.

"Whatever you're thinking-"

"What was it like then?" Really Ratchet knew he had little right to demand this information. Drift's past was his own, and he had no right to judge.

To judge Drift that was. *Megatron*, on the other hand...

"Deadlock was a good fighter. He caught Megatron's optic," Slipstream shrugged. "They ended up doing it in an empty armoury. It wasn't special enough for anything else, but everyone heard about it and Starscream's hated him ever since."

"So what are you saying? Drift's a homewrecker?"

Slipstream laughed. It was a smug, mean, Starscream-like laugh. "It was centuries ago. Starscream wasn't involved with Megatron then. Not in any physically intimate way at least. The dysfunctional attempt at a relationship that exists today is the work of over three million years of hate-flirting."

She slapped him on the shoulder, "So stop worrying. Deadlock's all yours."

Ratchet grit his teeth, but he couldn't find it in himself to lie and say he didn't want him.

Hooks Are All The Rage

There wasn't much about the Decepticon base to write home to the Ark about. Not unless any of the Autobots Ratchet knew were harbouring secret submechano fetishes.

If he were feeling particularly generous he could admit there was a certain character to it's patchy, water-warped bulkheads and optical straining purple theme, but dilapidated was dilapidated, and if -no, *when* he finally returned to the Ark, he probably wouldn't miss it's ominous creaking, nor the full body shudder that cut through him after stepping in another cold puddle of sea water, nor the reactive instinct to look up all the time in order to avoid falling debris that he had developed during his stay.

What he could admit to possibly missing though, was the view.

Admittedly, there wasn't much of one. Sunlight couldn't breach their depth and the vast majority of the submerged warship's surviving viewports stared out into the thick black abyss.

But on the first sub-deck, through the broad rectangular viewport of a workshop, a strip of safety lights that had once ran along the hull of the warship still flickered and glowed an eery neon purple, illuminating the sand of the sea bed and drawing in the sparse but wondrous creatures that dwelled with them in the barren depths.

Ratchet had stumbled upon it while looking for a tough enough crowbar to prise Dragstrip and Scavenger apart after a disastrous attempt at getting the combiner teams to combine *again* with each other into an abomination of a super-combiner (nice to see Megatron was back to the harebrained schemes) that had left the two with their armour tangled and trapped under each other's plating.

He came down to watch the creatures sometimes, amazed at the biodiversity of the planet. How it's rich resources had allowed for such broad evolutionary development. Luminous beings of all shapes and sizes and colours and unique curiosities.

There was a sudden crack and flash of light behind Ratchet, and the tiny creatures he had been crouched besides the viewport to watch hover around the lights with tentative curiosity, fled in a tiny puff of kicked up sand.

Ratchet glared, "Thanks, Skywarp."

"You looking at the bugs?"

"Fish," Ratchet corrected him.

"Nah," Skywarp was shaking his head when Ratchet turned to look at him, pointing to the very corner of the viewport, where one of the creatures was bumping against the glass in confusion. "No backbone. Just cuz they live in the water doesn't mean they're fish."

Ratchet squinted at him suspiciously, "...Really?"

Skywarp crossed his arms and lifted his chin proudly, "They're *arthropods*."

Ratchet rose to his pedes slowly, his one good hand braced against the bulkhead as his joints creaked in protest, "That's a big word."

A shrug, Skywarp looking less proud now as he quietly admitted, "Thundercracker likes organics."

"That's an odd thing for a Decepticon to like."

"Not like that," Skywarp frowned defensively, "I just mean he finds them interesting. Sometimes he brings weird things back here. Makes me ...pet them and stuff." He shuddered in revulsion. "You know some of them are covered in *hair*? Get's everywhere. All over my upholstery. Worse than glitter."

He turned back to the viewport. "These guys aren't so bad I guess," he gestured to the idiotic little shrimp-thing still bouncing against the glass of the viewport. "They're relatable."

Ratchet found himself staring. Just when he thought he'd figured these seekers out...

Skywarp mistook his lengthy silence though, and shifted nervously, "Um, maybe don't tell Starscream though. He's an aft about that sort of thing."

Ratchet shook himself out of his stupor, "What do you do with the animals? After ...petting them?"

"TC takes them back up," Skywarp leaned against the bulkhead and tapped his finger against the glass lightly, finally discouraging the little creature away from the window. It swam frantically in the other direction, disappearing into the depths. "He knows it's not fair to keep them. In case you haven't noticed, it kinda sucks down here."

Ratchet hummed his agreement, staring out across the still seafloor. "You won't be down here forever."

"Doubtful," Skywarp snorted. "But hey, I've got some good news-"

Ratchet groaned. Skywarp's Venn Diagram of 'good news' very rarely intersected with Ratchet's.

"-Knock Out found schematics for a hook-hand!" Skywarp grinned excitedly. "You'll look like Lockdown-"

"Primus *no*," Ratchet snapped, "I'd rather keep the melted stump!" He thrust it in Skywarp's face to enforce his decision.

Skywarp veered away, "You can't keep that. You'll creep everyone out."

"And a hook won't?"

"Hooks are cool. You'll look like a badass pirate."

"Because that's a look I've always aspired to pull off," Ratchet muttered to himself. "No. Tell Knock Out if he's not going to take this reconfiguration seriously he might as well scrap the arm from the forearm up and screw on a spare part from the factory line."

Skywarp studied his own (factory built) hand, "They're not so bad."

"For you maybe," Ratchet grumbled, struggling to think of an analogy Skywarp would understand.

"How would you feel if you lost a wing? And someone replaced it with a clumsy piece of sheet metal?"

Skywarp was silent for a long while.

"So you can't fix anyone anymore?" He asked softly.

"I still have this one," Ratchet lifted his left hand, closing it slowly into a fist. "First Aid always joked that I could perform a triple-bypass with one hand tied behind my back. I suppose now I'll have to prove him right."

The mention of an Autobot caused Skywarp to frown. "Starscream was saying you wanted to go back to them. You're not really gonna leave us, are you?"

Ratchet blinked at the question, confused by it. "If I'm *released*?"

"But you're not a prisoner anymore. Not really."

"Oh aren't I?" Ratchet said incredulously, "Skywarp, I wouldn't be here if that were true."

The seeker looked down, and if Ratchet didn't know better, he would think he looked hurt by that idea. "So this whole time, you still hated us?"

Hated?!

No, the voice in Ratchet's head cried. Of course he didn't! But his mouth wasn't anywhere near as decisive. He mouthed at the air, struggling to translate the complicated feelings he had developed into words that could do them justice.

"I don't hate you," he finally managed, cringing internally at how lame and unenthusiastic that had sounded. "I think you're a bit of a hopeless idiot, and you're a violent thug, and you definitely need therapy-"

Skywarp laughed, "Therapy? C'mon, I'm not *Starscream*-"

"Everyone here needs therapy," Ratchet said firmly, finger pointed. "Don't even get me started on the pitiful lack of anger management-"

"Who needs anger management?" Skywarp exclaimed hotly, "I'm a fragging joy."

"You are," Ratchet agreed with a smile he wasn't able to suppress. "Despite all that, despite everything I know about you and have seen you do, you're ...you're *okay*, Skywarp."

It was hardly a glowing compliment, but Skywarp certainly took it like one, wings swinging upwards in a delighted arch to match his smile. "You're not so bad either, Autobot."

Ratchet stuck out his good hand for a handshake, but Skywarp clasped his wrist instead -a real Vosian handshake.

"Friends?"

Ratchet could hardly reject him now. He rolled his optics fondly, "Alright, Warp," he sighed, gripping his forearm in return. "I guess you wore me down."

After a full afternoon spent being bullied by the likes of Blitzwing and Astrotrain over his hand -or the lack thereof- Ratchet begrudgingly returned to the repair bay.

What little optimism he had summoned throughout the day evaporated upon arrival. Vortex was still in pieces on the workstation. Untouched. Left to rust.

Catastrophic head injuries of this nature were never quick fixes, but it was clear Knock Out didn't have the work ethic Ratchet did, and little -if any- progress had been made on his repairs. Ratchet might have blamed Knock Out's self-centred personality and lazy disposition on the delay, but he had a sneaking feeling *someone* else was to blame for distracting him.

He yanked back the privacy curtain from the examination slab and was utterly unsurprised to catch Breakdown and Knock Out entwined together on it, mid-kiss. Breakdown's optics snapped online as a panicked note was muffled in their kiss, his hand skidding across Knock Out's hip with a squeak of metal on metal as he jumped.

Knock Out tore his mouth free with a horrified noise.

Ratchet quickly took a step back, thinking he was about to pay dearly for his unwise interruption- but when Knock Out jumped out of Breakdown's lap he ignored Ratchet completely, scrambling for the equipment table to snatch a handheld mirror off it.

He angled it towards his hip, in his reflection the concern marring his expression sharply transmuted into anger.

"*Breakdown...*" He began darkly.

Breakdown held out his hands, "It's just a smudge-"

"It's a great big ugly streak across my plating-!" Knock Out flung down the mirror, pointing accusingly at the small, messy paint transfer on his otherwise flawless hip, "I'll have to get a *complete* repaint-"

"*Ahem!*" Ratchet interrupted loudly, before their argument could make him any angrier. "I think a streak on your over-polished aft can wait, don't you?" He swept a hand back to gesture to Vortex.

"He's not going anywhere," Knock Out rolled his optics, "I, on the other servo, now have to be seen in public like this."

"Cosmetic repairs *never* come before incapacitating injuries!" Ratchet snarled, "No wonder you never finished your training. You were probably too busy admiring yourself in the mirror to study-!"

"Hey, Ratch' c'mon," Breakdown complained, "He's right about Vortex. There's not much he can do-"

"He can at least *try!*" Ratchet shouted, "Because I would be if it wasn't for-"

He waved his damaged hand around wordlessly, too angry to continue the sentence.

He had to take a deep steadying breath before he could continue, quietly, "...You can't just leave him like this."

"I'm not going to," Knock Out replied smoothly, fairly unfrazzled by Ratchet's outburst. As a Decepticon sort-of-medic, he was probably used to angry people shouting in his face. "But I'm also not going to risk botching him. There's not a lot of room for improvisation with processor damage, especially if you're not sure what you're doing in the first place."

Ratchet rubbed his hand down his face. Now that he'd calmed down he was feeling overwrought, and a tad unreasonable. "You're right." He admitted gruffly. "Better to wait, and do it properly."

"On the *other servo*, there is one repair I can do today..." Knock Out began, stepping towards him - and it became clear the 'other servo' he was referring to was Ratchet's melted stump of a hand. "Shall we take a look?"

Ratchet looked at his tarp encased hand. He hadn't removed the covering and taken a look himself yet. He almost didn't want to know the extent of the damage. The numbness from the forearm down gave him the impression that there wasn't going to be much to salvage anyway. He feared that seeing it for himself would make it all a bit too real. He wasn't sure the reality of the long term consequences had hit him yet.

Breakdown got off the examination berth and after a half-hearted argument, Ratchet was forced into taking his place. Ratchet studied the stains on the bulkhead as Knock Out's elegant fingers carefully revealed his damaged limb.

He turned it over, studying it for a long while. Knock Out didn't say anything. Ratchet didn't look.

"It's bad," Ratchet read into the silence.

"It *is* bad," Knock Out didn't bother to sugarcoat it.

Regret echoed in Ratchet's chest. He wondered if it would have felt like less of a blow if Knock Out had danced around it.

"You might as well have dunked your fist into an industrial smelter," Knock Out continued.

Ratchet glanced at it. The last time he'd seen the injury it had still been a glowing, dripping mess of metal, sparking weakling as wires crossed, spewing foul smelling smoke as plastic and rubber burned. Now it was grey and warped. Lifeless.

"No point carrying around dead weight," Knock Out released him and gestured to Breakdown to bring him something. "We'll remove it for now, then we can discuss replacements."

"No hooks," Ratchet muttered sullenly.

"Hooks are all the rage," Breakdown joked lightly, handing Knock Out an electric saw. "Lockdown's looks pretty cool."

"There's nothing cool about Lockdown or his idiotic hook hand," Ratchet snapped, "You're no better than Skywarp."

"You could go with 'The Shockwave', then?" Knock Out joined in on the teasing, thumbing on the saw, "I hear a blaster-hand is very 'logical'."

They were trying to distract him from his miserable feeling of loss. And doing a terrible job of it. It wasn't the soothing comfort Wheeljack would have offered, or the impassioned motivational speech Optimus would have bestowed on him, but Ratchet appreciated the clumsy attempt all the same.

"You give me a claw-hand and I'll use it to clamp your wheels," he threatened.

Knock Out smirked and brought down the spinning saw blade.

Ratchet felt somewhat unbalanced after the amputation. His right side noticeably lighter. He couldn't fault Knock Out's work. The cut was clean. Wiring and cables had been replaced and reconnected, and the damaged paintwork had been retouched flawlessly. It was like it had never happened. Save for the missing hand.

Ratchet still would rather not think about it yet. Which was a hard thing to achieve when he kept reaching for things with a hand that no longer existed...

In the past he always had buried himself in his work. And he *could* still work. He still had one, perfectly functional, dexterous, forged hand, and he was going to make damn sure he used it. Even if he could no longer work on something as complicated as Vortex's processor, there were still other mechs that needed his help. Some more than others. And not all of them *physical* ailments.

He headed straight down to the Flight Rec, ignoring the concerned glances shot towards his missing hand when he entered the room.

"Where's Sunstorm?" He demanded, noticing the obvious absence of both radiation and self-righteous preaching. He surveyed the room in search of his telltale halo of gold, but the room was gloomy and cool. Sunstorm was neither present nor in the vicinity of the other seekers.

Odd.

Worrying.

"He didn't come back," Ramjet called from the sofa where he was hunched over and trying to read the tiny print on a minuscule human magazine he had gotten from Primus-only-knew where. "So it'll be a quiet cycle for once, thank the Thirteen..."

Nova Storm came up behind him and smacked him in the head. Ramjet dropped his magazine. "Hey!"

"He hasn't been responding to comms," Nova Storm explained, ignoring Ramjet's grumbling. "I wanted to go out looking for him but Starscream forbade it."

"He's right, Nova," Slipstream's voice came from behind Ratchet, making him jump. He stepped aside to let her enter the room, veering back to dodge her wing as she swept past. "Screamer knows how Sunstorm thinks. He doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking he could *ever* be important enough to warrant being looked for."

"But there's something wrong with him," Nova Storm began to protest.

"Well *yeah* there's something wrong. It's Sunstorm," Ramjet scooped up his magazine and sat down again. "Maybe he does need to spend some time out there by himself. Realise he's not so special as he likes to think he is-"

"What are you reading!?" Nova Storm leant over the back of the sofa to squint at his magazine. "'21 Mind Blowing Sex Moves You've Never Tried Before'?" She read.

Ramjet flung the magazine up above his head so she couldn't see it, face turning purple. "I was reading a different article-!"

Slipstream snatched it out of his hand and frowned at the open page, "...They're wrong, I've tried all of these-

"Sunstorm!" Ratchet snapped at the easily distracted seekers. "If you're quite done ogling that classless magazine, has anyone seen or heard from *Sunstorm*?!"

The sinking feeling at Ratchet's core worsened as little but silence and unsure shrugs answered him.

-Until Skywarp appeared in the room with a crack and flash of light, right next to Slipstream. His optics, naturally, were drawn to the magazine.

"Gross!" He exclaimed, reaching for it, "Human's have spikes too?!"

Ratchet threw up his hands. He should have known better than to bother with the seekers.

Soundwave was no more clued into Sunstorm's current whereabouts than the airforce, which Ratchet suspected was just as unnerving for the Third in Command as it was for him. From what little time he had spent with Soundwave, Ratchet had come to learn that he as a mech who liked to be in control, and had no qualms using his unique abilities and privileged position as head of Decepticon intelligence to keep it that way.

Starscream may have forbidden his seekers from organising search parties for their missing lunatic, but Soundwave at least seemed to take the danger Sunstorm posed not only to just humans, but to the entire planet, much more seriously. When Ratchet found him in one of the communications rooms -in a wing of the base Ratchet was technically forbidden from entering- Soundwave was already searching for him.

"Does Megatron know?" Ratchet risked asking him.

It took Soundwave a while to respond. He stared at the monitors in front of him silently, watching the Geiger counters for any change. "No."

"Is someone going to tell him?" Ratchet wondered, hoping it wouldn't be him. "Or is this beneath his notice?"

"Sunstorm falls under Starscream's jurisdiction." Soundwave intoned mildly.

"I think you should call Shockwave."

Soundwave's hand paused above a key he had been about to press. "...Explain."

"Maybe he can give us some insight on Sunstorm. Like, what's *wrong* with him, for instance."

Soundwave turned and surveyed Ratchet silently, "Shockwave has no involvement in Sunstorm's emotional disturbances."

"Shockwave has every involvement in this." Ratchet argued. "He cloned Sunstorm, didn't he? He's his responsibility."

"Negative."

Ratchet had opened his mouth to further damn Shockwave and his unregulated bastardisation of

science. He shut it with a clack at the surety of Soundwave's denial. "Sorry?"

"Sunstorm: Is not a clone."

Ratchet stared, his understanding of the situation deteriorating rapidly, "Then... where did he come from? And why does he resemble Starscream so much?! Just because it's a common stereotype that all seekers look alike doesn't mean-"

"His spark was found," Soundwave explained softly. "Shockwave merely built him a frame strong enough to withstand the ionising radiation he emits."

He brought up a new window on the monitor screen. One displaying the complicated blueprints of a modified seeker. Ratchet didn't have to look closely to know they were Sunstorm's schematics. "His spark signature resonates with Starscream's. They share personality defects and mannerisms. I believe they might have been brothers."

"How do you know that?"

Soundwave didn't answer.

Ratchet exhaled heavily, "So no one has any idea how this happened to him?"

Soundwave shook his helm.

"Well, I suppose that'll have to be a problem to solve another day," Ratchet placed his hand on his hip and lifted his chin, "But for now you can still call Shockwave and tell him to start collaborating with Starscream on a new frame for Sunstorm. One that can *contain* as well as withstand. So maybe then he won't have to be such a pariah."

"Such a feat is unachievable," Soundwave didn't have a lot of faith in that idea.

"Tell that to Starscream," Ratchet pointed at him, "And hopefully he'll take it as a personal challenge."

Sunstorm spied a meadow between the gaps in the clearing clouds.

He had been flying over water for so long he had almost forgotten the luscious green land that existed on this planet. He reversed his thrusters and began a slow descent, hoping he could find peace in the quiet solitude of nature.

The punch he had been dealt had hurt more than he had expected. He hadn't realised the medic would have it in him. But Primus had healed his injuries swiftly, and not even the ghost of the sting from his broken nasal plate bothered him now. He had checked his reflection when he'd flown low over the ocean, and the ridge of his nose was once again as straight and flawless as ever. Unchanging. Perfect.

The meadow he had landed in was full of tall grass and wildflowers. The air was fresh and cool. Insects chirped and buzzed about in the mid afternoon sun. There was a beauty in the chaotically diverse mess of this planet that he could appreciate. Most of his kin despised organics, but however far removed from Primus some of these creatures were, they had been placed in this universe for a reason.

He smiled when a bird called overhead, glancing up to watch it glide as effortlessly through the sky as a seeker. It was joined by two more, and together they had made their very own trine. Sunstorm's smile faltered slightly.

He reprimanded himself. He wasn't alone. Primus was with him always. In his spark and in the energon that rushed through his lines, gifting him his golden glow, weaponising and protecting him. So long as he had his faith, he was never alone.

The breeze stirred the tall grass and he glanced down when something caught his optic. There was a flower beside his pede. Butter yellow, like his armour. Standing out amongst the sea of greens and reds and whites. Its seed must have strayed far. It didn't belong with the others.

He felt a strange kinship with it.

"We are all the more perfect for our differences, friend," he told it softly, bending down to pick it.

He straightened back up with it. But the flower had already died. Golden petals curling and burning, turning to blackened ash in the blink of an eye.

Sunstorm stared at the ash on his fingers until the wind blew it away, leaving his hand empty, as if nothing had ever been there at all.

He closed his empty fist, struggling against a rising tide of emotion.

He looked back at the dark footsteps he had left in the meadow, where the wildflowers had died where he'd stepped. The insects had fallen silent, quick to succumb to the radiation in the air. The birds would likely follow. They couldn't survive in his presence. Little ever could.

He looked down again, and the circle of dead grass around his feet had begun to widen and spread as his radioactive output went up and up and he couldn't find it in himself to stop it. Trees ignited. The air tasted of metal. The smoke turned the clear blue sky grey with thick, toxic clouds.

The heat from the radiation surging through Sunstorm's frame burned the streaks of moisture from his cheeks.

But he was Primus's chosen, and this was his purpose.

To Pick Flowers

Ratchet recharged fitfully, a sense of foreboding that had plagued him throughout the day lingered in his mind beyond consciousness. A sense that something terrible had happened. Or was going to.

Someone approached his room. He woke before his door had even opened, swinging his legs off the berth to stand and meet his late night visitor. Drift stopped short just one step into the room. His optics were blown round, dilated with unrest Ratchet was unused to seeing in the stoic assassin.

"You heard?" He sounded breathless, like he had run here.

Something in Ratchet's chest twisted and knotted.

"No I, I just woke up," Ratchet swallowed. "What's happened?"

Drift's optics darted away from him, "...They might need you soon."

"What's *happened*, Drift?" Ratchet asked with more force, taking a step.

"It's Deadlock-" he was corrected meekly.

"I don't care what you're-!" Ratchet stopped himself and curled his hand into a fist. He took a breath. "You're scaring me," he admitted. "What's going on?"

Drift shook his head like he knew he wasn't supposed to be telling him, but was going to anyway, "We think it's Sunstorm..."

"You should have woken me earlier," Ratchet snarled, striding as quickly as his legs could carry him without having to resort to running. He was too old to run. Even in an emergency.

Drift's long agile legs allowed him to keep pace easily. His unhappy frown was back as he tried to get Ratchet to slow down, "This doesn't have anything to do with you. You're just feeling guilty about having hit him-"

"You wouldn't understand," Ratchet snapped aggressively.

Apparently, not long after Ratchet had retired for the night Soundwave had picked up on a huge spike in ionising radiation, five hundred miles into the mainland. It was much further than anyone had seemed to think Sunstorm would stray.

The radioactive output must have been great to have been detected so far away, so either the core of one of the human's dodgy nuclear stations had gone into a meltdown, or Sunstorm himself had. And a much worse one than any of Shockwave's data had anticipated he could at that.

Whatever it was, the Decepticons weren't going to be the only ones going to investigate. If handled badly this could turn into a catastrophe.

Megatron and Soundwave had left some hours ago, having taken only the Rainmakers with them.

It made sense. A large sprawling army wouldn't do much good against someone who could *dissolve* phase sixers on impact. Either Megatron was banking on Sunstorm's tentative relationship with the other seekers being enough to draw him back to them or, if it came to it, he probably planned to use Nova Storm's rare durability against him.

Ratchet remembered how the paint had bubbled on her arm from the other side of a blast door from him though. She might last longer. But ...she still wouldn't last for long.

It wasn't going to come to that though. If Ratchet had to lose his other hand slapping some sense back into that seeker, so be it.

Starscream was in the communication room, manning the open comm channel and keeping an optic on human military transmissions in case he should need to forewarn Megatron of any unwanted visitors. He was leant forward in his seat, hands clasped together in front of his mouth like he was plotting. Skywarp and Thundercracker were with him, with Skywarp leaning right over to try and watch the computerised display showing the real-time spread of radiation across land and sea.

Upon Ratchet's entrance Starscream's concentration was broken. He rolled his optics at Drift, "*Wonderful* job Deadlock, that's just what we need. A fretful Autobot."

"Shut up, Starscream," Ratchet snapped before Drift could respond. "Tell me what's going on."

"I'm sure you already know," Starscream sneered pointedly at Drift.

"Yes, you hate him. We know." Ratchet said in a bored voice, sidestepping to stand in front of the assassin so Starscream couldn't keep casting him dirty looks. "Is this *not* a time sensitive situation?! Your *comrades* are out there, Starscream-"

"Yes, and *I* am down here, safe and sound." Starscream leant back in his seat and fold his arms over his chest. Ratchet might have been horrified at the sentiment that comment implied had he not detected the resentful undertone to his words.

"Megatron said he couldn't come," Thundercracker leant in to explain helpfully.

Starscream slammed his fists against the armrests. "He did not say that!"

"No, what he said was, '*Starscream, I don't need you making this worse*'," Skywarp agreed, mimicking Megatron's rasp terribly. Starscream's lips pressed tightly together.

"Well too bad for Megatron because we're going," Ratchet said firmly. "You and me, Starscream. Get up, let's go."

"You?!" Drift exclaimed in shock.

"Me?!" Starscream did too. "Are you *deranged*?! If you want to meet a hideous death at the 'flaming hand of Primus', go ahead, be my guest. But you're not dragging me down with you!"

"Can I come instead?" Skywarp volunteered.

Under less stressful circumstances Ratchet would have appreciated the gesture. "No, Skywarp, you're the opposite of what this situation calls for."

"And you think *Starscream* is going to be a calming presence?" Drift chipped in again. "You think *you're* going to be a *calming* presence?"

"It doesn't matter what affect anyone will have on the situation because no one is going!" Starscream stood up and put his foot down with a smart little *clack*. "You-" he pointed at Ratchet, "-Are a prisoner and flight risk, and I? I am not risking my life or my paint-job to rescue a nutjob who doesn't even want to be saved. And I'm certainly not doing it all for the handsome reward of Megatron locking me in the brig for insubordination afterwards!"

"So you're going to choose *now* of all times to be a good little seeker for Megatron?!" Ratchet couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Starscream's cheeks glowed red. "You hate Sunstorm," he said angrily. "So don't act like you have the moral high ground, like you want to go up there to *help*. You just want to watch the radioactive fireworks."

It was so far from the reality of what Ratchet wanted and so obviously an attempt to bait him, that it inspired nothing but weary impatience from him.

"He's not going to calm down on his own. Not now," Ratchet said quietly, pointing to the worsening waves on the computerised display behind Starscream. "Do you really think Megatron can talk him down? Do you think the Rainmakers could take Sunstorm in a fight, if he lashed out?"

Starscream had turned to glance at the monitors. "He'll burn himself out eventually."

"Will that be before or after he kills every living thing on this planet?"

Starscream didn't answer.

"Your seekers are up there," Ratchet stared him down. "Megatron is up there."

"Fine," Starscream agreed suddenly, elbowing Thundercracker roughly towards his vacated seat so he could take over monitoring duties. "But if Megatron blows a gasket over this, *you're* taking the blame."

"I'm coming as well," Drift said firmly, stepping up behind Ratchet.

Starscream groaned, "Of course you are..."

Starscream bullied Astrotrain into taking them, boarding the triple-changer himself too, citing some excuse about needing to avoid smoke in his vents. Astrotrain snorted audibly as he took off from the top of the tower, muttering something under his breath that to Ratchet's audials sounded like he was calling the Air Commander lazy -and sexually promiscuous. But he wasn't confident enough on his human slang to be sure.

It was a dark night, and at altitude the ocean and sky merged into one great blackness. Ratchet gripped one of the safety bars tightly. Without a horizon to focus on it was easy to feel motion sick. Their journey grew bumpier as they progressed into the night, until finally Ratchet wrinkled his nose at the smell of smoke.

Through Astrotrain's viewports swelled a sickly orange glow. There was a sharp line in the distance, marking the edge of a huge fire than spanned miles in each direction. The clouds above

were thick and smouldering, glowing like they concealed a dragon. Ratchet had never seen anything like it.

"Take us around it," Starscream advised Astrotrain, a deep frown set on his face.

"What is it?" Ratchet murmured.

"...Just a thunderstorm," was Starscream's delayed answer. Ratchet wasn't entirely sure he believed him.

Astrotrain banked left, but there was no clear path to approach from. It was wild and hot inside the clouds, and Astrotrain's engines sounded like they were struggling. Turbulence shook them about, but when Ratchet stumbled, Drift caught and steadied him. Ratchet grabbed his wrist and didn't let go.

Across from them, Starscream turned away from the window long enough to roll his optics at them.

If the hellish pyrocumulonimbus cloud hadn't been exciting enough, Astrotrain then had to fly them through torrential acid rain on their descent, gallons of it pouring down on his armour with harsh stinging pings.

"*This Acidstorm?*" Astrotrain grunted through his speakers in mild annoyance. "*Didn't think he had this much control over it...*"

"It's not Acidstorm," Starscream murmured. "It's the smoke from the fire. Sunstorm's burnt over fifty thousand acres."

"Acres?" Drift asked.

"Nearly eighty square miles," Starscream exchanged a glance with Ratchet. "Something tells me Megatron's not having much luck."

Outside the viewports the ground was getting closer, but Ratchet still couldn't see it for all the smoke. He was inclined to agree with Starscream.

Ratchet could taste the metal in the air as radioactive heat began to mingle with that of the spreading wildfires. They were close now, but he began to worry that they might not even find anyone in such poor visibility. They could have flown straight over Megatron and never known he was there.

But if Sunstorm was ever anything, it was that he was always hard to miss.

They were still flying through a featureless orange haze when something flashed in the sky above them like a strike of lightning, golden and silent, a web of colour spidering out from one point beyond the neon tinged clouds.

"Take us down," Ratchet heard Starscream order as he pressed himself against the viewport to see above them. Surges of gold continued to light up the edges of clouds around them in sporadic pulses.

They landed with a commendably soft bump and Starscream was already leaping from the exit hatch, throwing a shrill bark over his shoulder, "Stay there!"

Drift made to follow him, and Ratchet was hardly going to stand around inside the transport doing

nothing like an idiot.

"*Ratchet*;" Astrotrain warned, but he made no attempt to lock him in.

"Someone could be injured," Ratchet threw him an excuse anyway, already dropping down onto the dark, ashy ground. It was still warm under his pedes.

He couldn't see much and had to use his headlamps to navigate his barren environment. Burning embers still lingered in the air. Ratchet's headlamps passed over the broken remains of what had probably once been a thriving forest. Trees laid broken and burnt out in front of him. It was devastating, how unsuited this planet was to handling Sunstorm.

His surroundings were lit briefly by another flash from the sky. Ahead of him he caught a glimpse of Starscream and the others, huddled around someone. Something lodged in Ratchet throat, making it hard to swallow.

He jogged towards them, stumbling slightly from not looking where he was going, his head tilted towards the sky. Behind thick cloud cover a sun-like being smouldered vengefully. Furious crackles and flashes cast shadows across the clouds. Ratchet recognised the shapes of jets. The Rainmakers were up there with him...

He realised how much worse the situation was when he reached the other Decepticons and the smell of fresh energon was suddenly stronger than the smoke. Megatron was bent over Soundwave, who was sporting a horrific hand-shaped burn on the left of his torso. It had melted through exterior armour, interior armour, protometal, *and* several clumps of wiring to penetrate his fuel tank. Megatron's hands were covered with energon, and not all of it just his Third in Command's.

Despite all that, he was still arguing with Starscream.

"-told you to stay in the base!" He thundered, and lifted his head to glare fiercely at the seeker.

A convenient flare of radioactive light illuminated him for Ratchet. He wasn't fairing much better. It looked like he had been struck with one of Sunstorm's heat surges. A good portion of his left side was blackened with burnt off paint. The edges of his once straight armour panels were warped and leaking energon. His left optic was bleached yellow and flickering.

"The Autobot?! *Really*?!" Megatron yelled again when he spotted Ratchet. "You seekers are in fine form today!"

Starscream seemed too shocked to say anything back.

Unintimidated by Megatron's unwelcoming greeting, Ratchet shoved Starscream out of the way and dropped down next to Soundwave, batting Megatron's hands off with his one good one.

Megatron had almost stopped the bleeding. There were just a few minor lines to clamp. Soundwave would be okay, but he wasn't getting up and walking away by himself today.

Ratchet set to work as Megatron stumbled upright and continued to scream himself hoarse at his Air Commander. "Of all the petty, *stupid* stunts you've pulled-!"

Ratchet tuned him out.

The sky crackled and flashed gold. The light stained the clouds with the enlarged shadows of two seekers flying in formation, looking like they were fighting against the storm itself. Ratchet

understood, now, where Sunstorm's delusions of grandeur had come from. Because kneeling on scorched earth below it did almost feel like a God was smiting them.

"You have to call the Rainmakers down," he called to Megatron, anxiety climbing with every flash and flare. "Call them back before they're killed!"

"And let *him* run riot!?" Megatron thrust his arm towards the sky, flickering optic making him look a tad unhinged.

"For Primus's sake, reason with him!" Ratchet snarled, still kneeling over Soundwave. "He's not a malfunctioning weapon, he's a sentient being!"

"We tried reasoning with him and he did *this*-" Megatron pointed to Soundwave. "-then flew off to do worse! This ends now. I have no use for such an uncontrollable liability."

Ratchet felt this was too serious a situation to point to Starscream *-another* uncontrollable liability- standing *right next* to Megatron, who was currently (bizarrely) trying to hold his leader still long enough to wipe up some of the energon leaking from his injuries. Starscream's priorities never ceased to amaze Ratchet.

"Megatron, please," Ratchet pushed himself up. Drift took his place with Soundwave, dragging an arm over his shoulders to start lifting him. "I know he's dangerous, but I don't think this is intentional-"

"You're not making the compelling argument you think you are," Megatron said coldly, lifting his comm-link to his mouth. "Ion Storm, enough of this. Put him into stasis with an EMP."

Ratchet's spark jolted. "They're fifty thousand feet up!" He yelled, "A fall from that height- it- they can't touch him to - they won't be able to catch him!"

Megatron didn't respond, conviction hardening his gaze. "Ion storm?" He pressed.

The comm crackled with disturbance. Ion Storm's voice was barely audible over wind and radioactive interference, "*But- Meh- sshk-- EMP? C-firm?*"

Megatron opened his mouth to clarify the order.

"No!" Ratchet dove forward and grabbed Megatron's arm in desperation. Megatron snarled and swatted him back like a fly. Ratchet fell back to the ground with a thump and wince as his old struts rattled. Drift stood behind him with Soundwave draped over him, conflict marring his features.

Luckily, Megatron didn't seem inclined the hammer the lesson home this time, and left Ratchet on the ground.

"You're an old fool," Megatron shook his head, lifting his comm again.

"Starscream?!" Ratchet never thought that of the two highest ranking Decepticons he'd be putting his faith in the seeker being the more reasonable of them. "Starscream, they're your seekers. Don't let him do this. Go up there, talk him down-"

Megatron stomped towards him aggressively, cutting Ratchet off with a snarl, "He's not going up there. He shouldn't even be *here*." He snapped his gaze to Starscream. "Take Soundwave and go. All of you."

"I-" Starscream's optics darted between Ratchet and Megatron, torn. "You're being ridiculous," he protested shrilly, settling on Ratchet. "I don't talk people *down*, I egg them *on*. I wouldn't even know what to say-"

"Nothing," Megatron snapped, "Because you're going-!"

"Just tell him the truth," Ratchet ignored Megatron in hope that Starscream would too. "Tell him he needs to come home. Tell him it's going to be okay. Tell him you're going to fix this."

Starscream was shaking his head, huffing a humourless laugh of disbelief, "No one can fix this."

"Well you can at least fragging well try for once," Ratchet pointed angrily. "I don't know what the Pit he is to you; your brother, your clone, your slightly-less-evil twin-"

"Brother?" Megatron murmured, sounding perplexed, and perhaps a little fearful.

"-but whatever he is, you're stuck with him." Ratchet continued. "So fragging well suck it up and think of someone besides yourself for once, because however bad a day you think you're having," Ratchet pointed to the sky. "He's having a worse one. And he's not going to come down if he doesn't know there'll be someone here waiting for him."

Starscream was glaring at the ground angrily, which probably meant he was experiencing emotions he didn't want to acknowledge he had the capacity to feel. "...What makes you think he'd want ...me? Why don't *you* tell him all this soppy nonsense?"

"Because I punched him in the face, Starscream." Ratchet reminded him tiredly. "And Megatron here wants to kill him so, you're probably our best shot."

Starscream exhaled heavily.

Megatron, who had managed to keep himself silent for a full minute, shifted towards the seeker like he could sense the decision before Starscream even made it. "Don't you *dare*-"

Starscream shot into the sky, the white and red of his armour streaking into a blur of colour. Megatron and Ratchet shielded their optics from the ash cloud his launch kicked up, and then they were looking up, necks craned back as far as they could go to watch the little specks of amber that were Starscream's thrusters disappear into the chaos.

Megatron's arms fell to his sides in defeat.

Drift came up behind Ratchet, still supporting Soundwave. Ratchet quickly checked to make sure the fuel clamps were holding, meeting the Third In Commands dimmed visor with a reassuring smile. Soundwave managed a weak nod of thanks.

"Think this'll work?" Drift asked softly. "Sending Starscream?"

Ratchet shrugged, adjusting a clamp, "I don't know."

"Ratchet," something in Drift's voice made him look up. Drift's focus was beyond him though, on Megatron who was staring up at the sky with something like desperation in his expression. "If something happens to Starscream..."

Ratchet nodded in understanding. Megatron was going to hold him accountable if this went wrong. The thought should rightly terrify him. But if he *had* just sent Starscream to his end? He'd probably deserve everything Megatron dealt him.

They waited. Ratchet's spark was still pounding harshly against the inside of it's chamber.

As they watched, the sky flared an even brighter gold. Megatron took a step forward- but then it began to calm almost instantly. The clouds didn't recede but they began to darken, losing their neon hints of toxicity. Ratchet heard thrusters roaring in the distance, and out of the abyss, three wobbly Rainmakers descended.

A smile of relief stretched Ratchet's face. Nova Storm's engines were making an unhealthy chugging sound and none of the Rainmaker's original vibrant colourings were visible behind the thick layering of ash, but they looked okay.

They reeked of chemicals and were searingly hot when they approached. A disgusted Megatron wordlessly pointed then back towards the sky, sending them away without a word of praise for what must have been a torturous night.

"You did great," Ratchet decided to say it instead, knowing they'd need it. Tears had cleaned streaks through the soot covering Nova Storm's face. She sniffed and smiled wetly.

Megatron glared at him hatefully.

Probably because Starscream had yet to reappear with Sunstorm.

"What are they still doing up there?" Megatron demanded of poor Soundwave, still hanging off Drift's shoulder.

Soundwave's visor flickered for a moment. "...Starscream; asking Sunstorm what he wants."

"He's making a list of *demands*?" Megatron bared his denta.

Soundwave shook his helm, "...Things he wants to be able to do."

Megatron peered up at the sky curiously. "And?"

"...He wants to pick flowers."

There was a pause as this information sank in.

Megatron threw up his arms in defeat.

"I am done. I can no longer tolerate this or any of you." He bent forward and took Soundwave from Drift, hoisting him up over his shoulder. Soundwave emitted a noise of discomfort.

"Careful-" Ratchet began.

Megatron's burning optics silenced him sharply.

"Starscream can take it from here," he growled. "I am taking Soundwave back to base, and I expect you *both* to follow." He focused on Drift. "You will inform both Starscream *and* Sunstorm that I expect them to report to me for disciplinary action the second they return to base, and you," Megatron glared at Ratchet. "...Are lucky that worked."

"Or maybe *you're* lucky that I came?"

Ratchet didn't know what Megatron might have done to him then had he not been carrying Soundwave and had his hands full. Nothing gentle, he imagined. Megatron stomped off in the opposite direction in a clear huff, and Ratchet could honestly say he wasn't looking forward to

seeing him in the repair bay later.

He and Drift lingered, and eventually they saw Sunstorm and Starscream land a few feet from them. Ratchet made to approach, but Drift stopped him with a hand to his chest. "Give them a moment."

Ratchet watched, trying to decipher what they were talking about. They were standing close now that the radiation seemed under control, perhaps more so than was advisable, but then, Starscream was never one to err on the side of caution.

Sunstorm looked wrung out and emotionally shattered, his wings were hanging low and twitching shyly. But as a counterpoint Starscream's were flicking up encouragingly and resting in a passive position. It the equivalent of an outstretched hand. An offer of friendship, even. Ratchet felt a swell of pride rise in him at them both, but Starscream particularly. For all his talk that he couldn't do it-

But then all their carefully made progress came tumbling down.

Their only warning was the rev of an engine. Ratchet couldn't tell what direction it had come from but Drift was shoving him back suddenly, his guns online and ready. Starscream and Sunstorm were further forward and distracted by one another, and didn't realise what was about to happen until a red streak of light came flying out of the darkness at them.

"No," Ratchet breathed in horror.

The Autobots.

Everything happened so fast. The first shot had missed it's target but it was followed by dozens, raining down on Starscream and Sunstorm in a shower of red.

A surprised Sunstorm was nicked in the wing and his frame surged with radiation in response to the unexpected pain. Ratchet felt the subsequent flash of heat from where he was standing.

Starscream was stood too close. Far too close.

Blaster bolts were still coming in as Starscream fell to the ground in a sizzling heap, in so much pain his scream was muted by his vocaliser shorting out. Smoke was pouring off him. Sunstorm was frozen where he stood, looking down at Starscream-

"No! No, wait!" Ratchet began running towards them, hands outstretched, when Prowl emerged from the darkness with his blaster drawn. "Prowl, no-!"

Prowl saw him and fired almost out of shock, his hand spasming around the blaster. The shot went wide because of it. He stood in place as his tac-net reassessed, but it was for a moment too long. A stun-bolt came out of nowhere and he dropped.

Drift.

The assassin overtook Ratchet, sprinting towards Starscream, shooting down more and more emerging Autobots.

Ratchet found himself stood in the middle of the chaos. Drift had Starscream, was shouting at a shellshocked Sunstorm to go- go home, while he tried to fend off assailants. Autobots. Ratchet's friends.

"Ratchet!" A voice cried. Ratchet looked around in a daze, and there was Sideswipe, relief written

all over him. His hand was outstretched, waving him over. "Quick, Ratch', c'mon I gotta get you outta here!"

Ratchet stared, mouth dry and optics stinging. He could hear Starscream sobbing brokenly in pain. The stench of burnt paint and hot metal stung his olfactory.

Ratchet took a stumbling step away. He couldn't. He couldn't leave. Not now.

Sideswipes relieved smile began to slip away, "Ratchet?"

Ratchet turned and ran after Drift, sprinting through the dark and dodging blaster fire. Astrotrain had already taken off and was hovering just off the ground, his hatch open. Ratchet dove in and it slammed and locked after him.

Starscream had been laid out on the deck on his back, he was shaking uncontrollably, breathing raggedly. His paint was still actively bubbling from the radiation still cooking him. Energon leaked out of the corners of his optics as the delicate fuel-lines behind them ruptured.

Ratchet laid his hand over Starscream's forehead, stroking him. "It's okay," he murmured, as Drift worked to deactivate pain sensors and Astrotrain blasted them into the sky at full speed.

"You're gonna be okay."

Cockroach

By the time they were descending Starscream was no longer responsive, his breaths coming in weak stutters, head lolling listlessly to the side as turbulence rocked him. He was riddled in cracks and welts, blackened and unrecognisable.

Ratchet worked furiously to remove his cockpit canopy before the melted glass dripped down into his internals, barking orders at Drift to hurry up and crack his chest plating open to let trapped heat escape Starscream's spark chamber before his innermost energon bubbled over.

He had worked on fire damage before, often even. A common problem for racers was overheated engines, and one of his first weeks as a qualified medic had involved him jabbing the hose of a fire-extinguisher into some stupid rookie's grill and filling them with foam till it was exploding out of their armour seams after they'd pushed themselves too hard to win a race. Fire wasn't all that fatal for them. They were built to withstand higher temperatures than organic life and flames were easily smothered, burnt armour quickly replaced.

But Starscream wasn't fire damaged. It was more like he had been microwaved- a potentially lethal dose of gamma radiation cutting through armour layers and cooking him from his centre outwards. His own melting fuel pump was superheating his energon and pumping it around his frame, the boiling liquid stripping his fuel lines down to ribbons-

Astrotrain swung out his aft, turning sharply to position himself directly over the tower entrance. With his hand currently occupied, Ratchet wasn't able to balance himself and was knocked sideways, cursing.

"I'm in the middle of something here, idiot!" He barked at the triple-changer, scrabbling back into place.

"We're landing!" Drift snapped at him, still struggling with Starscream's armour. Giving up on gentility he stabbed a short blade between Starscream's chest plates to crack open the seam. A rush of steam burst out -water that had once been in Starscream's cooling system- and Drift replaced the blade with his fingers, prising the armour further open to let his poor spark breath.

"You'll burn yourself," Ratchet muttered distractedly, gutting the inside of Starscream's cockpit of its clutter. Controls were sparking and spewing smoke. The pilot's seat was just a skeletal frame, blackened strips of leather hanging from its edges.

"Bit late to worry about burns..." Drift murmured.

Ratchet took his optics off his patient for the first time since boarding Astrotrain. Dozens of surface burns marred Drift's armour where he had carried Starscream to safety. He dropped his gaze with a shake of his head, "Just what I need, more repairs-"

"You're burning your own hand, right now," Drift nodded to where Ratchet was hastily shaking his fingers cool in the air before plunging them back into the heated depths.

"My hand can handle it."

"You've only got the one left-"

"I said I can handle it!"

His shout was punctuated by the bump of Astrotrain landing. He quickly clamped a main fuel line - though it didn't do much good, fuel pressure had dropped to a measly trickle, most of Starscream's curdled energon was currently drenching Astotrain's interior- and elbowed Drift back to lift the seeker himself.

"I'll take him!" Drift insisted, smacking his wrist aside. "Just stay here. You can't lift him with one hand anyway."

"I still have *two* arms," Ratchet felt his face turn hot. "I told you I-"

"I said I'll take him!" Drift was all sharp points and harsh edges, his face hardening with stress. "What do you think is going to happen when you walk in there with Starscream looking like this? Ratchet, Megatron is-"

"*Coming up now.*" Astrotrain's voice interrupted through the speakers with an underlying note of regret. "*I called ahead. He knows.*"

All the colour faded from Drift's optics, until they were almost white. Ratchet barely had the energy to fuel his own fear. Starscream was dying at their feet. His own hypothetical fate could wait- but Drift had other ideas.

"I'll take him to Megatron. You go," Drift decided, dropping to one knee and lifting the seeker. Starscream was limp, like a rag doll. His head hung over Drift's shoulder. Ratchet moved to support it, but was shouldered back. "I said go!"

"What are you talking about?!" Ratchet snarled, "Go where?! I need to-"

"The only thing you need to do is get as far away from this as you can. Astrotrain, take off as soon as-"

"I'm not leaving now!" Ratchet exclaimed, "Starscream needs me!"

"No he *doesn't*," Drift insisted. "Ratchet, *look* at him! You know we don't have the parts..."

"I can make do!" Ratchet argued fiercely, more fiercely than he'd ever argued for anything here. "If I can just get him through the night I-"

"His spark won't last till morning."

"-if he's hooked up to manual support systems-!"

"Which we don't have?!" Drift cried incredulously, shaking his head. He began walking backwards, towards the exit hatch. "You can't be here when - Please. *Please*, just go."

"I *can't*," Ratchet swallowed, following him anyway, "And I'm not leaving just because you think-"

Drift froze just before the exit hatch, optics bursting with sudden colour again. Ratchet nearly walked into him, screeching to an unbalanced halt just before collision. He followed Drift's gaze, and took a cautious stumble back at who he saw waiting for them.

Megatron's intimidating stature filled the breadth of the exit hatch, expression frozen in shock. He was staring down at the seeker in Drift's arms and didn't even seem aware that there was anyone else present, not Drift, certainly not Ratchet. Neither of them spoke to remind him.

Starscream was still. No longer breathing. Not even a struggling rasp for breath.

Megatron was still badly damaged. He might not have even made it to Knock Out before hearing the news. Energon was dripping off the ends of the fingers he extended to Starscream, reaching for a paint-moulded cheek.

Drift ducked his head to avoid his leader's gaze when Megatron stepped in to take Starscream, shifting him into his arms with a caution Ratchet didn't know him capable of. Ratchet's spark plummeted at the sight of him in Megatron's arms. He looked so much smaller.

Megatron turned away with his Air Commander, walking back towards the tower entrance, head bowed as his optics never once left the seeker's vacant face.

The doors shut behind them, leaving Drift and Ratchet standing in Astrotrains's hatch.

As Ratchet's spark pulse began to slow, a cold realisation started to settle in. He looked down at his palm, so soaked in Starscream's energon he could barely see the burns. Guilt swarmed in his tanks and rose up into his throat, it's magnitude threatening to choke him.

Drift was right. There wasn't anything he could do.

Ratchet did not enter the repair-bay.

Knock Out and Hook's gestalt would already be working hard on their patients and with things currently as they were, he felt he'd only be in the way. He gravitated towards the medical wing of the base anyway, and spent the hours following pacing the corridor outside.

Drift stayed with him, unable to convince him to leave, or even compromise to at least get some recharge. He instead opted to stay with him, guard him almost, his keen optics focused on the sealed doors into the repair-bay in case a grief-riddled killing-machine came charging out, on the warpath for some cathartic vengeance.

His paranoia wasn't soothing Ratchet's frayed nerves.

Drift seemed to think it was only a matter of time, but Ratchet was of the private belief that if Starscream did ...*fade* in there, Megatron wouldn't come out guns-blazing. He probably wouldn't come out at all. Not for a long while at least.

But It was eerily quiet, such a contrast to what a repair-bay under Ratchet's authority would be - loud, but organised chaos. The silence wasn't necessarily a good sign though, because it meant no one was fighting, rushing around frantically, making last ditch attempts to save someone. Unless Knock Out was a secret thaumaturgist, Starscream wouldn't be stable. They were probably just ...waiting.

Ratchet paused mid-step, optics flitting to the doors.

"You go in there," Drift's voice drifted over, "and Megatron will shoot you."

He was leant up against the bulkhead by the doors, arms crossed over his burn-stripped chest.

Ratchet shrugged, "Or, he might let me help."

"The only reason you're not already *dead* is because he's distracted," the bluntness of Drift's words

came from a place of concern for him, but they didn't hurt any less to hear. "If you go in there and remind him you exist, he going to remember just who is at fault for-"

He stopped, shutting his optics in anger. Ratchet reassumed his pacing.

"I don't mean that," Drift spoke again a moment later, "This wasn't your fault."

"Well who's is it then?"

"Sunstorm?"

Ratchet whirled around angrily, "*Really?!'*"

Drift shrugged, unapologetic, "Someone has to take the blame. It shouldn't be you."

"Shouldn't be Sunstorm either," Ratchet muttered, kicking at the decking. He glanced at the doors again. No sounds drifted out from within. He wondered what was happening in there. Soundwave will have been put in stasis the moment they got him lying flat, but it was unlikely Megatron was accepting treatment while Starscream was inching ever closer to his end.

He would probably be at his side, scowling down at Starscream as if his disapproval over the situation alone could revive his Air Commander. For once, Ratchet wouldn't have argued with him for delaying or rejecting treatment in favour of standing vigil. When sparks were under such acute stress, fighting with every pulse, there always came a point when they just ...went out. Some fought for days. Some hours. Some much less.

Often the worst the strain, the quicker the fade.

The thought made Ratchet cold. He shuddered.

"Do you know if he came back?" He asked Drift suddenly, searching for distractions. "Sunstorm?"

"I wouldn't know. I've been with you."

Ratchet rubbed his forehead as stress mounted. It was quiet and still and only the sound of his own pedefalls on the decking broke it. "So we have no idea where he is? Does that mean all this was for nothing?"

"No, of course not." Drift pushed himself away from the bulkhead and straightened up. "It was just bad luck. If you hadn't intervened, Sunstorm would be likely be dead. Or, all of us would be..."

"And now instead just Starscream will be," Ratchet exhaled, but with every breath his chest felt tighter. "He didn't even want to come. I made him. He knew this was a bad idea-"

"You didn't make him," Drift protested. "I was there, remember? He came because he knew you were right. And you were. He talked Sunstorm down. *You* convinced *Starscream* to negotiate with someone. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't been there to see it myself."

Ratchet said nothing.

"What do you think he said to him?" Drift asked.

"Probably a bunch of lies and empty promises," Ratchet grumbled.

They fell silent again.

On the other side of the door they could hear speaking - low, solemn murmurs. None of the voices sounded like Megatron, and Ratchet was grateful none of them were Starscream either. His damage was so extensive he could only hope the seeker wouldn't wake. That he would just slip away quietly, even if it was such an un-Starscream-like thing to do.

"I know about you and Megatron," he said, the thought suddenly manifesting out of nowhere. He hadn't actually wanted to bring it up. Ever. But anything was preferable to silence.

"Oh," Drift didn't look particularly surprised. Or embarrassed. "...Starscream told you?"

"Slipstream did."

Drift rolled his optics. "Of course she did. Doesn't have any of her own gossip so she goes around telling everyone else's. You must be traumatised."

"Of course not," Ratchet snorted. "I'm just amazed Starscream never killed you for it."

"He tried once or twice," a strangely fond smile lifted the corners of Drift's mouth. "I don't think his spark was ever really in it though."

"I suppose if he murdered you then he'd actually have to admit that Megatron really did mean something to him after all," Ratchet murmured. "Do you think he knows?"

"Who?"

"Megatron," Ratchet stared at the doors. "You think Starscream ever told him?"

"No," Drift looked up at the ceiling. "But I think he knows anyway."

There was something in his tone that made Ratchet look back at the Decepticon, his throat tight and spark aching. Death often made mechs introspective, prompted them to look more closely at what they had or what they wanted.

He swallowed, summoning his courage, "Drift, I-"

"I can come with you," Drift abruptly interrupted.

Ratchet's confession died in his throat. "Come with me where?"

"Back to the Autobots," Drift crossed the hallway to stand in front of him, conviction deepening the furrow of his brow. "I'll help you escape. Just us."

Ratchet stepped back, "I'm not going anywhere, Drift."

Drift's optics were vibrant with sadness, "And you think I'm going to stand by and watch Megatron blow you to pieces?"

"We don't know that he'll do that."

"Regardless of what happens to Starscream we know he's going to blame you. And no one is going to stop him because the only two mecha who can even remotely reason with him are both currently in stasis with radiation damage," Drift lifted his chin, jaw hardening. "But he'll have to go through me to get to you-"

"Don't say that," Ratchet hissed, looking back to make sure they were alone. "These are ridiculous hypotheticals-"

"Then let's get out of here and they will be!" Drift said urgently.

"I- I can't go back." Ratchet admitted.

"Of course you-"

"They saw me leave with you," Ratchet folded his arms and ducked his head. Sideswipe calling to him lingered in his mind- his expression of betrayal when Ratchet backed away from him. "They watched me turn my back on them and go with you, with Starscream."

"...You think they'll call you a traitor," Drift's voice was soft with understanding.

"I think it'll be difficult to explain how I'm not. And maybe they'd be right. I've been here, weeks now, fixing their enemies willingly, sending *spies* into- into their base to steal equipment-"

"You haven't betrayed them." Drift's hand found his shoulder and squeezed. "Or yourself. Don't punish yourself because you think you have. If that's why you think you have to stay here and wait for some grand comeuppance at the hands of a grief plagued Megatron all because you refused to ignore people in need-"

"You two are looking cozy!" A voice called from the other end of the corridor, so inappropriately joyous Ratchet spun around in a rage, knocking Drift's hand off his shoulder.

It died an instant later. Skywarp and Thundercracker were strolling towards them, seemingly unaware-

"There's something you should know," Drift stepped forward, voice gentle. "Starscream-"

"We heard he was injured," Thundercracker nodded, and he looked tired, but bizarrely ...unworried. Ratchet stared in confusion. "But Sunstorm's popped back up on the radar, seems to be hovering around our airspace."

"Slipstream's already gone up to get him, since everyone else is..." Skywarp waved his hand around, searching for the term. "...In various stages of melting, but since TC outranks her-"

"-only on Earth," Thundercracker reminded him.

"-which is *where we are*," Skywarp shot him a look before continuing, "So since TC's now acting Air Commander of Earth forces, it's really *his* job to get burnt into a crisp next, not hers."

Ratchet wondered if the stress of everything was giving him some sort of glitch-related hallucination. "Do you not realise how serious Starscream's condition is?"

"We know," Thundercracker nodded, with a weighted sort of exasperation. "Warp and I have been here many times before-"

Ratchet took an angry step forward, riled by their flippancy, "You can't be-!"

Drift's hand on his shoulder had an instant calming effect. He let himself be drawn back, shuttering his optics and pushing back his emotions as Drift stepped out in front of him.

"I can help with Sunstorm," he offered. "He was upset, but not angry."

"Well, good," Skywarp interjected, "Because Sunstorm thinks we all hate him. You'd do much better job luring him down than us."

"Probably best you stay here then, Warp," Thundercracker advised, and Ratchet didn't miss the seeker's unsubtle nod in his direction. He rolled his optics with a scoff.

"I don't need a babysitter!" He snarled.

"I think he meant for you to be *my* babysitter, but I'll take the compliment," Skywarp smiled, waving Thundercracker off.

Drift looked back at Ratchet meaningfully before moving to leave with Thundercracker.

"Skywarp?" He called to the other seeker, "You'll be sure to keep Ratchet out of Megatron's way, won't you?"

Skywarp gave him a confident thumbs up, slumping back against the bulkhead and sliding down it until he was sat on the decking opposite the repair bay doors, his legs extended before him. He wriggled his fingers to coax Ratchet down with him.

With a weary sigh, Ratchet gingerly got down with him. His joints protested, but the pain wasn't an unwanted distraction.

They sat in silence for a while, staring at the doors.

After a while Skywarp shifted, never still nor silent for long.

"He'll be okay, you know," the seeker reassured gently. "He always is."

Ratchet closed his optics against a wave of sadness. "Skywarp..." He began. "I don't know if he will be..."

Skywarp shook his helm, fairly nonplussed. "C'mon Ratch', don't you remember what I told you? Starscream's pretty cockroach-y. Primus has been trying to get rid of him for centuries, so the universe is gonna have to try a lot harder than having a false prophet accidentally blast him with gamma radiation."

Ratchet looked down at the burns on his hand. He closed his fingers into a fist, saying nothing.

"He was blown up once, did you know that?" Skywarp continued casually, bringing his knees up to his chest so he could rest his chin atop one. "Him and like, his entire cell. Autobots planted a bomb to destroy the fuel processing centre they were operating out of. They reported his death and everything. But when me and TC were released to go and recover his remains, we found him alive, trapped under a collapsed cooling tank."

Ratchet managed a small smile. "He's had more than his share of lucky escapes-"

"No," Skywarp was looking at him, suddenly serious. "It wasn't a lucky escape. One of the support beams had pierced him through the spark chamber."

Ratchet stared.

"When we pulled it out of him, it was, it was like someone had bent the steel rod away from his spark before it stabbed through. Like, like his spark itself was strong enough to deflect steel," Skywarp impressed on him. "Like it was stronger than steel. Starscream tried to get me and TC to run tests with him after, you know, like, trying to stab his spark with all these different materials. But Thundecracker didn't like the idea of me shooting Starscream in the spark with blasters, so we had to cut it short."

Ratchet was dimly aware that his mouth was open. "...You shot him in the spark."

"Only once," Skywarp held up a finger. "And it deflected and hit *me* in the optic."

Ratchet blinked.

"They fixed it though," Skywarp smiled, winking the optic. "Eventually."

Ratchet was rendered speechless, all processing power diverted to making sense of the information he'd just heard. Was Skywarp telling the truth? Was it even possible? If Starscream's spark was really strong enough to resist blaster bolts and steel beams, what did that mean for him now?

It meant- it meant it might be able sustain itself long enough to get Starscream through repairs, however long it took to source the blasted equipment.

He braced his hand against the bulkhead and stood up, a little too quickly. Skywarp rose to steady him, "Hey, you're-"

"Why didn't anyone mention this?" Ratchet brushed his hands away furiously. "It's not on his file!"

"Of course not," Skywarp snorted, "Screamer wasn't going to advertise it. The less people knew about it the more he could use it to his advantage."

"Megatron doesn't know?"

"Just me and TC."

Ratchet's hand shot out and grabbed Skywarp by the front of his armour, yanking him in until Ratchet's snarling fangs were inches from his shocked face.

"You mean to tell me," he began, breathing raggedly, "That I've been emotionally torturing myself for the last - *two - hours*- and he ***can't even DIE!?***"

Skywarp's mouth pressed into a petulant scowl, "I *told you* he was like a cockroach!"

Ratchet released Skywarp with a shove, stuffing down any lingering feelings of negativity to make way for a much more familiar sense of stubborn determination. Starscream was going to make it. Repairs weren't going to be easy and Megatron may yet kill him, but Starscream was going to live.

"C'mon!" He barked at Skywarp, striding into the small office next door to the repair-bay, "You're going to do a job for me."

Skywarp followed with clear eagerness, "Aren't I meant to be hanging around as your emergency escape teleport for when Megatron remembers you exist and tries to slag you for ruining Screamer's pretty face."

"That depends," Ratchet yanked open drawers of the desk inside the office until he found a datapad and light-pen. "Can you teleport into the Ark?"

Skywarp pulled a thoughtful face, as if he'd honestly never thought about it before.

"Can you?" Ratchet pressed.

"I guess. In theory. But I'd probably port myself onto the bridge and get shot straight away."

"You won't," Ratchet held the data-pad in place with his hand-less forearm and began scribbling furiously with the light-pen. "Because I'll draw you a map."

"A map?" Skywarp hovered at his shoulder.

"And a list."

"Of what?"

"The equipment and supplies you're going to steal," Ratchet finished and looked at the lengthy list of items before pushing the data-pad into Skywarp's chest. "You may need to make two trips."

Skywarp began to read off of it, "Spark stabiliser, *transformation cog*-" Skywarp looked at him with wide optics. "The Ark just has those *lying around*?!"

"It has everything on the list," Ratchet turned him towards the door. "Now get going, and for the sake of the Thirteen don't get caught."

Skywarp subspaced the list and saluted him with two fingers. "No problem. Just try not to get murdered until after I get back!" He called, before vanishing with a bright crack of blinding purple.

The Megatron Removal Service

It was 3am, and Optimus had had less than one hour recharge.

It wasn't particularly unusual. He'd had trouble recharging lately. He'd had ...trouble with a lot lately, to be perfectly honest.

On top of longterm recharge-deprivation he also currently had twelve voicemails from the regional director of national parks wanting to know why a '*flaming metal bird*' had just decimated an owl sanctuary awaiting his reply on Teletraan I. There were also several human media crews camped outside the Ark, and in lieu of getting any real answers were now inventing outlandish stories about vengeful Archangels starting wildfires.

That was only the human-related problems. Within the Ark were half-a-dozen Autobots sporting stun-blast hangovers and twice that many choking on the ash clogging their vents. First Aid was already run off his feet after Wheeljack had blown off his own arms (and poor Grimlock's tail) because no one with any common sense had been present when the engineer had been testing the boundaries of thermodynamics last week. That was on top of Ironhide having a virus he was too distrusting to let anyone treat.

There was also an emotionally distraught Sideswipe being restrained in the sub-deck workroom, loudly exclaiming that he was going to storm the Decepticon base singlehandedly if he had to.

And Hound, Cliffjumper, and Bumblebee were *still* out there somewhere, helping rescue services cover ground in search of survivors, and Primus only knew what state they would be in after hours spent off-roading through radiation soaked earth.

There was likely a great many more issues that Optimus couldn't bear to even remember now.

He had always felt the weight of responsibility resting upon his shoulders, but now it was crushing him, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could stand under it.

Ratchet had always meant a great deal to him. He was one of his oldest, dearest friends. But he'd never realised how much he had relied on him - to fix, to advise, to reprimand, to comfort. How they all had...

"Still no answer from the Decepticons," Prowl stated stiffly, poised to reenter the communication frequency as the dial-tone rang out again. "Funny. You'd think Megatron would have leapt at the opportunity to gloat."

Sat on the floor with his back resting against Teletraan's terminal, nursing his fourth engex in half as many hours, Optimus mumbled an vague agreement into the cube. He was almost glad- beyond the point of wanting to speak with Megatron now, even if only to receive an official acknowledgment that the Decepticon's were taking responsibility for the night's catastrophe.

He no longer possessed the grace to hold a civil conversation with his long time enemy. Not after this.

"Let's look on the positive side," Jazz smiled with a sarcastic sort of forced cheeriness. "At least we know he's not dead?"

Prowl started stabbing Teletraan's control keys with unnecessary force. Optimus threw back the rest of his engex. It burned his throat and rolled in his tanks, but it's warming effect did nothing to sate

the chill in his spark.

He stared at the remaining dregs, bitterness lingering on his tongue despite the sweetness of the fuel, "Perhaps Sideswipe was mistaken."

"But *I* am not," Prowl reminded him with a sharp look. "Ratchet was there with them. Helping them burn down the planet-"

"I've set bigger fires than that for fun," Jazz tried to play it down, nudging Prowl lightly. "And how do we even know he was acting on his own free will? He could have been brainwashed? They could have uploaded one of those old slave-codes into him."

"No," Optimus disagreed softly. "Megatron would never-"

"We thought Ratchet *would never*," Prowl snapped. "Face the facts as they present themselves, Optimus. The evidence is overwhelming."

"You'd really give up on him so easily?" Optimus looked up at him, incredulous, hurt. "On Ratchet?"

"Haven't you?" Prowl nodded to the empty cubes.

"Prowler," Jazz stepped between them to intervene before their raw emotions let the disagreement turn ugly, but he was distracted suddenly. He snapped his head to the left, visor dimming suspiciously as it focused in the direction of the main-deck medbay. "Did you hear that?"

Optimus hadn't heard anything but Prowl's complete and utter lack of faith. "He is our *friend*, Prowl."

"You didn't see him," Prowl argued back.

"No, I didn't," Optimus agreed darkly. "So tell me Prowl, how *bad* must it have been for you to throw out millions of years trust? Did he shoot at you? Did he-?"

There was another noise, the muffled sound of clattering from inside the medbay, like someone had walked into a shelf and sent tools scattering. Optimus heard it that time, his sentence trailing off in his distraction.

"It's been weeks, Optimus," Prowl wasn't so easily drawn away from a heated argument. "Who knows what he's been through, what they've told him? He wouldn't be the first good mech we've lost to Megatron's rhetoric, and Ratchet's never been the perfect Auto-"

Another, even louder, clatter cut Prowl off, followed by the sound of someone cursing colourfully. It was a deep voice. Optimus didn't recognise it. First Aid certainly didn't use language like it, and he was supposed to be down in the wash-racks, helping mechs scrub off the toxic ash so it wasn't walked any further into the Ark.

All three of them must have been thinking the same thing, because they looked at each other in deep concern when another bang sounded, followed by a hiss of pain, "*Ow, motherfucker-!*"

"...Is First Aid not still in the wash-racks?" Prowl pushed away from Teletraan and stood slowly, optics trained on the bridge entrance into the main-deck medbay.

"He is," Jazz moved to stand at his side. "Could be Wheeljack."

"Wheeljack doesn't say 'fuck'," Prowl's glare sharpened.

Optimus braced a hand against Teletraan and began to rise to his pedes. Four engex's left him a little wobbly, but he managed to right himself and walk in a straight line. "Wheeljack curses," he pointed out, perhaps just to disagree with Prowl for the sheer sake of it.

"Not human curses," Prowl strode forward quickly, right as another tumbling noise sounded.

Whoever was inside must not have known what they were looking for- which likely meant they weren't authorised access to the equipment. Optimus and Jazz stood at Prowl's shoulders as he tapped the access panel to open the doors.

They swept away to reveal an utterly ransacked medbay-

-and a pair of black wings, marked with a strikingly purple Decepticon insignias.

Hearing the swish of the door opening, Skywarp performed a pirouette, spinning to face them with arms overflowing with equipment and parts.

Jazz lifted his blaster but wasn't quick enough to beat a teleporter. He fired the same instant the seeker's warp drive activated. Jazz's blaster bolt stuck the bulkhead behind where Skywarp had stood, scorching the metal cladding.

A lone transformation cog dropped out of midair and landed on the decking in the centre of the room with a '*clunk*'. It must have slipped from Skywarp's grasp a mere microsecond before the jump.

Optimus's shock had barely receded when he took in the state Ratchet's medbay had been left in; the emptied drawers and scattered screws and bolts. Data-pads were strewn across the floor, some of them cracked and sparking where they had been dropped or stepped on by clumsy thruster heels. Ratchet had kept his space organised to perfection, but now it seemed to be reflecting Optimus's inner state of mind.

In other words, an unruly mess.

"...'Not what it looks like', Optimus?" Prowl folded his arms angrily, throwing his earlier defence of Ratchet back in his face.

Optimus sighed, processor giving a painful throb-

-When out of nowhere there was a second crack and flash, purple light searing their optics and blinding them. Jazz jumped so violently his blaster flew right out of his hand. Skywarp was back in the middle of the medbay, crouching on the floor to snatch up the fallen transformation cog.

"Whoops!" He called to them, picking it up and wriggling it. "Forgot this!"

Another crack and fizzling flash, and he was gone.

Optimus, Prowl, and Jazz stared at the space he'd occupied, this time at a complete loss for words.

"What..." Jazz was the first to speak. Softly, and with great feeling, "...Has he been able to just teleport in here this whole time?!"

Optimus didn't want to think about it. His helm throbbed again. "I need to lay down..."

"And I need to consult with Red Alert," Prowl turned and swept from the ruined medbay. "Clearly,

our security needs upgrading."

Jazz kicked a screw sullenly. "Why do the Con's always get the coolest outlier abilities?"

"Mirage turns invisible," Optimus reminded him.

"That's not cool, that's creepy."

Optimus supposed it was, in a way.

In a strange twist, Starscream's shockingly irresponsible decision to keep his outlier ability a secret (if such a drastic spark mutation could even be called that) was actually going to work to Ratchet's advantage. In order to keep it hidden Starscream wouldn't have consulted with the other Decepticon scientists, like the infamous lone-optic'd one on Cybertron. It meant all the information he had gathered on his condition was squirreled away somewhere here, in Starscream's little bedroom turned laboratory, well within Ratchet's reach.

It was good news, because it had been a nightmare getting any information out of Shockwave on Sunstorm so far, and Ratchet wouldn't have expected to fair any better with any other project Shockwave had undertaken. He and Soundwave suited each other in that way, he supposed. Secretive and neurotic to near dysfunction, they never would have let him set optics on a classified research file, let alone one on their own Second In Command.

Well aware that Skywarp was currently in the Ark and absolutely *trashing* his medbay, Ratchet didn't feel too guilty about making a mess as he rifled through Starscream's data-files and desk drawers in search of the information he needed.

The seeker's frequent bouts of treachery and assassination attempts meant Megatron probably made an effort to look through Starscream's work himself from time to time, searching for incriminating evidence. So something this secret wouldn't have been left in plain sight. Ratchet abandoned his search of the usual places and began running his hands over the bulkheads, looking for loose paneling and secret compartments.

He was balancing on a desk stool, looking behind the ceiling tiles when he was unexpectedly joined in Starscream's lab-quarters. He wobbled precariously in surprise as Mixmaster and Breakdown made a hasty entrance.

"Oh, hey Ratchet," Breakdown threw at him casually, breathless, he and Mixmaster hardly sparing him a glance as they began removing drawers and tipping them out onto the desktop, and searching through the shelves filled with vials of chemicals. "What are you doing here?"

Crouched on the stool precariously, Ratchet watched them search. "Spring cleaning," he lied, carefully stepping down. "What are you doing in here?"

"Knock Out thinks he might be able to get Megatron to drink a cube," Breakdown huffed. "He's lost a lot a fuel since he's refusing to sit down for treatment and won't let anyone filter energon directly into his lines."

"So you're going to try and force feed him?" He guessed.

Breakdown looked at him like he was crazy, "Uh, I think we're gonna try asking nicely first."

"Fat lot of good that will do," Mixmaster grumbled unhappily.

"That doesn't explain why you're in here. There's no energon," Ratchet squinted at some of the vials suspiciously. "At least, no energon I'd recommend consuming."

"No," Mixmaster agreed, "No energon. But there's a slag load of liquid inhibitors. Just gotta find 'em."

He lifted one of Starscream's empty drawers and gave it a shake. Something rattled inside and Mixmaster punched a false bottom out, knocking several items loose, including a handful of tiny vials which rolled merrily across Starscream's messy desk. Mixmaster snatched them up and held them up to the light, a grim smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

'Good ol' Screamer."

"Four should do it," Breakdown suggested, leaning over his shoulder to check the vials' contents.

Mixmaster shook his helm, "No point risking an under-dose. We'll give him all of them."

Ratchet shouldn't be surprised at the lengths Decepticons went to at times, but *honestly*. "Knock Out asked you to *drug* Megatron?!"

"Self-preservation," Mixmaster explained unrepentantly. "When Starscream kicks the bucket we're gonna be at the front of the firing line."

"No, I think you'll find that's me," Ratchet reminded them.

"He won't mind slagging a few innocent bystanders on the way, don't you worry," Mixmaster grumbled.

"You really shouldn't still be here," Breakdown added, his expression soft with concern. "You could probably slip out with one of the triple-changers. They like you. And Soundwave is down for the night, Hook's taken cognitive function almost completely offline to accelerate self-repair. Doesn't even remember his own designation, so he won't know they helped you."

"Why is everyone suddenly so keen for me to leave?" Ratchet demanded.

"Not looking forward to seeing you become a smear on the wall behind Starscream's deathbed, I guess," Breakdown said honestly.

Ratchet pushed down feelings of intimidation. He was here to stay, to help Starscream. He wasn't going to let Megatron chase him off just because the warlord couldn't process unpleasant emotions without resorting to lethal violence. "I could have left already, if I'd wanted to. I chose to come back."

"Bad idea," Mixmaster crossed thick arms over his chest. "Seems like the smart thing to do woulda been to run. Ain't no point you getting caught up in all this."

Ratchet shook his helm, "I don't need to leave, because Starscream's not going to die. No one is."

Mixmaster and Breakdown shared a glance. Ratchet knew the look, it was the one he'd given Skywarp, before he'd known.

"Ratchet," Breakdown began sombrely, "We've tried- but he's losing energon faster than we can pump it back in. Knock Out managed to cool him down but his internal parts all ...they all melted

together. And his processors's turned to mush-"

"His spark's still pulsing though, isn't it?" Ratchet ran his fingers over the items still covering Starscream's desk, the hidden objects that had been knocked out of the drawers false bottom. Something caught his optic.

"Yeah, but Knock Out just thinks that's Starscream being stubborn." Breakdown said with a sad sort of fondness. Something ached in Ratchet's chest at his tone. There was no love lost between most Decepticons and their difficult Air Commander- but sometimes people just couldn't help but get attached in the strangest ways, even to the very worst of creatures.

Ratchet would know...

"Look, I said he wasn't going to die. I didn't say he was going to be as right as rain afterwards," Ratchet lifted the item that had caught his optic; a memory drive. He smoothed his thumb over the hastily scribbled label. *DB backup 2.0*.

"But at least he'll still be him," Ratchet sighed with a surge of relief, holding it up to show them. "Trust Starscream to backup his *own* processor. Talk about contingencies..."

"What an egocentric," Mixmaster scoffed.

"Imagine if he'd ever actually applied himself," Ratchet smiled, turning over some of the other data-pads curiously. One was locked with an encryption, and with *that* telling detail, he had a feeling he'd found just what he needed.

Alongside it were a few embarrassingly personal items. There was hand written poetry on one of the unlocked files, not in Starscream's scrawling hand -it was both indulgently sappy and shockingly explicit with violence. Ugh, *Megatron*.

Ratchet shoved *that* one back into the drawer, hoping never to lay optics on it again.

"Now long do those inhibitors take to work?"

"On Megatron?" Mixmaster pulled a face. "...Well, they might not, to be honest."

"He's fuel deprived?" Ratchet queried, waking past the pair of them and expecting them to follow as they headed back in the direction of the repair-bay. "It'll work."

"You don't get it. He's standing in a puddle of his own fuel," Breakdown reminded him. "He won't sit down. We've been having to work *around* him-"

"Isn't there someone around here big enough and ugly enough to move him?" Ratchet snapped. "I'm already a literal hand down, and I won't be able to work on Starscream with Megatron breathing down the back of my neck the whole time."

"*You're* working on him?!" Mixmaster cringed.

"Ratch', that's not gonna work," Breakdown jogged to catch up with his fast pace. "Knock Out exhausted what supplies we had just getting Starscream to where he is now. There's nothing to do but wait, and hope Megatron's too damaged to throttle anyone after-"

"I've got it covered, I sent someone out for supplies," Ratchet explained, waving him off.

"Someone out?" Breakdown scrunched up his nose. "Out *where*?"

They were coming up to the repair-bay. So instead of answering, Ratchet pressed the access panel for the medical office next door, and with the exacting sort of timing he had come to expect from Skywarp, the room filled with a flash of blinding purple light as the seeker returned to them.

Skywarp stood before the desk, a lone transformation cog in his hand. He tossed it in the air and caught it again with a smirk, before setting it down behind him and opening his arms in triumph at the equipment and machinery scattered around him.

"Ta da!"

"What the-?" Breakdown poked at the spark stabilizer by the door in amazement. It was likely he'd never even seen one before. "Where-?"

"Were you seen?" Ratchet asked the most important question first, passing the seeker and assessing the supplies to make sure nothing had been forgotten.

"...No," Skywarp said after a strange and lengthy pause.

Ratchet looked at him. Skywarp kept his expression carefully neutral.

"Who?" He demanded.

Skywarp flapped a hand, "I dunno, just some ...nobodies."

"More than *one*?" Ratchet snapped frustratedly. "I told you, in and out!"

"I was! I just, there was a lot to carry! I guess they heard me dropping stuff."

Ratchet shook his head in despair, gathering up equipment and shoving it into Breakdown and Mixmaster's hands so they could help him carry it, "Just as long as it wasn't Optimus or Prowl, I think we'll be alright..."

Skywarp ducked his helm and covered his mouth, mumbling something about the parts Mixmaster was carrying being too heavy for one mech. Ratchet decided he was just going to have to worry about that later.

For now, he had a warlord to drug and a seeker to piece back together.

Ratchet had been told before that he was too stubborn for his own good. That he was a control freak. That he couldn't let things go. That he got too attached. That all these traits were undesirable in a medic. That in order to do the job properly, efficiently, effectively, he had to disassociate, emotionally, from his work, from his patients.

He wasn't completely obvious to his failings. He knew he wasn't the model medic, just like he'd never been the model Autobot. He was crass and harsh, he sometimes made mechs cry when he really should have been trying to comfort them. He took the sort of risks that would have given just cause for the Iaconian medical board to suspend him. He'd broken the law, unrepentantly, because sometimes the law had been unjust.

A guest tutor at the academy had once told his entire lecture theatre that as medical professionals they had an ethical duty never to put themselves at unnecessary risk to save a patient, because the

skills they possessed meant *their* lives had more value to society than that of the patient, because they would go on to save many more lives, even if it meant they lost that one.

Those words had gotten stuck in Ratchet mind. Sometimes, when someone said something *so utterly incorrect* and spawned such a strudeep sense of indignity within him, the words just lingered, over thousands and thousands of years. He never wanted to be that medic- that medic that didn't think one life could somehow be *worth* everything he had to give, risk or no.

That every life could be worth it.

It was a whole other ethical debate what a mech like Starscream was worth though -a war criminal, a sociopath, a drama queen- but that was the point of being a medic. You didn't get to choose your patients. You didn't get to choose who needed you.

So despite Breakdown's rushed, pleading whispers for him not to, Ratchet slipped into the repair-bay with him and Mixmaster, only *half*-ducking behind one of Skywarp's wings in case he was spotted and shot on the spot.

Neither him nor Breakdown should have worried. Mechs walking in and out of the crowded room went fairly unnoticed.

It wasn't pleasant. The overhead lights seared Ratchet's optics- on their brightest setting, used only for operations- and the smell of hot metal and burnt plastics that had been trapped in the room for hours had turned the air noxious.

Several mechs occupied the room, and Ratchet could hear every one of them cycling air, the swallow of their tight throats, the quiet shuffle of restless pedes. No one spoke. A symphony of beeps filled the silences in-between, machines working to keep struggling frames chugging along as best they could.

No one was dying, but Ratchet was the only mech here besides Skywarp who believed that. And it was still only a belief. Starscream was known for tricks and manipulations. He wouldn't be above playing such cruel ones on his own trine. Some outlier abilities were rarer than others, but a nigh-indestructible spark was unheard of.

His optic was drawn to Soundwave first, arranged carefully on a low bench. Ratchet scanned his datafile quickly. It looked like what spare parts they had had lying around had gone to him. First come, first serve. Not that a new fuel tank would have really done Starscream a great deal of good considering the extent of his injuries.

Despite Soundwave's stable and unconscious condition, most of the Constructicons were loitering around him, attempting to look busy. They were blocking the view of the berth behind, where Starscream must have laid. Hook caught his gaze and mouthed a warning to him. Ratchet ignored it.

Knock Out's helm lifted above the shoulders of the hunkered down Constructicons to send a desperate look Breakdown's way. He was the only mech still attending Starscream, trapped at the berth by the grief-stunned pillar standing besides him.

Megatron was utterly still, damaged arm dripping energon to puddle around his pedes. It was an insignificant spill compared to the lake that had dripped off the medberth he stood vigil over though, pink droplets still clinging to the berth edges as the manual pump Starscream's ruined frame was hooked up to diligently flooded his mangled fuel lines with energon they could hope to hold.

Behind Megatron was a bloodied table scattered with misshapen parts. Closer inspection revealed them to be the majority Starscream's internal components, most unrecognisable. The seeker on the berth was just a hollow frame.

Megatron had a hand resting on the only unburnt section of wing, right over Starscream's insignia, his fingertips brushing over the peeling paint in an aimlessly lost back and forth motion. Knock Out was futilely mopping up the energon, but that's all he could do.

Ratchet squared his shoulders and sent his elbow into Mixmaster's side. The Constructicon wasn't happy about being the sacrificial robo-lamb, but he inched forward nervously, just as planned. He extended the arm holding the inhibitor-laced energon cube towards his leader like it was the only part of himself he dared stick in his leader's personal space.

"Uh, sir?" he said, barely audible.

Megatron didn't respond.

"Speak *up*, dumb-aft." Skywarp hissed at Mixmaster, adjusting the heavy machine in his arms. "He can't hear you over the sound of his whole world crashing down around him."

"You should count yourself lucky he can't hear *you*," Ratchet muttered out of the corner of his mouth, giving Skywarp a little tug back.

"Lord- Lord Megatron," Mixmaster managed at a more decent volume, his vocaliser catching with nerves. "Your fuel, sir."

Megatron didn't take his optics off Starscream's wing. "Leave it."

Mixmaster shot Knock Out a look. Knock Out straightened up, summoning some of his infamously suave confidence, "My Lord, if I may be so bold as to suggest-"

"You may not," Megatron's tone was hollow, void of even anger. It was unnerving, and it shut Knock Out down instantly. Decepticons were used to their leader's rage. This was something they had no experience with.

It was a situation that should be handled delicately, but they'd wasted a whole night already and Ratchet didn't have the patience for yet more delays.

"Alright, enough," he snapped, elbowing the hapless Mixmaster out of the way and snatching the cube off him to thrust rudely at Megatron. "Will you drink this fragging cube and get out of the way so we can actually get to work? Or would you rather stand here and *watch* us dismantle the rest of him?! Because I can promise you, if you think he looks bad now just you wait till we start peeling that burnt armour off."

Megatron fingers stilled on Starscream's wing.

A crease marred his brow when he lifted his head, his scowl deepening into something fierce and vengeful, optics darkening till they were as colourless as Starscream's.

"You," he spoke in a low cold voice, hand falling away from Starscream's wing to curl into a fist. Even the damaged arm, dripping menacingly with its own energon, was locked and tight with anger. "*You* did this..."

"Maybe I did," Ratchet sucked in a sharp breath, but refused to be intimidated by him. "Maybe it is my fault, I can accept that, but I can also fix this-"

Megatron took a step. The bright lights above shone across his face and made him look pale and sickly, unhinged and emotional. The lines on his face were deep and striking.

Ratchet took a step back, feeling they were more than close enough already- the Decepticons behind shuffled with him. "Megatron, I know how much he means to you," he began.

"There's nothing left to fix." Megatron hissed, ignoring him. "Because you goaded him into disobeying me. You brought him with you on your deranged attempt at a rescue mission. You vouched for the creature that ravaged him. *You* sent him to his death."

"Megatron, he's not dead!"

Megatron's fusion cannon swung up, barrel glowing but struggling for power to charge, and that was probably the *only* reason Ratchet wasn't struck down that very instant. Mixmaster and Breakdown dove aside but Ratchet was left staring down into the neon glow of fusion about to fire at him, point blank. There was no where to run, nothing to defend himself with-

The barrel was thrust upwards, the building whirl of charging fuel cells suddenly ebbing away. Ratchet found himself shielded by a pair of black wings. In front of them, an incredulous Megatron was staring at Skywarp.

"You can't shoot him! He's a medic!"

Megatron set his jaw, "You would defend your trine-leader's killer?!"

"Starscream's not dead," Skywarp angrily pointed at the seeker's misshapen husk lying prone behind them. "But he might end up that way if you don't let him help! He's here to fix him-!"

"I left Starscream to his mercy once already tonight. I shouldn't have." Megatron said through gritted denta. "It's not a mistake I plan to make twice. Get out of the way, Skywarp. Starscream wouldn't want to be unavenged."

"What Starscream would want is for you to drink your drug-laced energon and get the Pit outta the way!" Skywarp exclaimed hotly.

Ratchet shuttered his optics in resignation. Skywarp and his big mouth...

Megatron's features, predictably, twisted in further rage.

"*Drug* laced?!" He demanded, snapping his head around to pin Knock Out with a glare. Knock out, brave warrior he was, dropped out of sight behind Starscream's medberth for cover.

The fusion cannon was glowing again. And Ratchet would have wondered at where Megatron even found the energy to support such huge reservoirs of righteous rage if he hadn't had more pressing concerns, such as diving for cover from a soon to be rampaging warlord-

The crack of a warp drive activating sounded, and just when Ratchet thought Skywarp had abandoned his temporary streak of heroism and left them all to their fate, a flash lit the room, and everything was suddenly still and quiet.

Ratchet looked up, and there was an uncomfortably cringing Skywarp, standing behind Megatron, with his *entire hand* phased through the back of his leader's helmet.

Megatron stood frozen in shock for a mere second before whatever Skywarp had done to him took affect. His cannon powered down as his optics rolled upwards into the back of his helm. Skywarp

teleported his hand out again and jumped back as Megatron began to teeter forwards.

"Catch him!" Ratchet barked.

Constructicons scrambled to catch their leader before Megatron collided with the medical equipment they needed, stumbling under his weight.

"Arrgh!" Scavenger's muffled voice cried out from somewhere under all that grey armour. "He's crushing me!"

Ratchet straightened up and stared at the scene in front of him in amazement, Scrapper and Longhaul trying to lift Megatron's legs as poor Scavenger was left to be squashed under his torso.

Knock Out crawled out from under Starscream's medberth in equal shock. "Well that's not something I ever expected to see."

Skywarp rubbed the back of his helm, "Wow, that was close huh?"

Ratchet stared at him, "What did you *do*?"

Skywarp shrugged. "Flicked the 'off switch' in his processor."

"Thank Primus no one's ever thought to utilise you properly, Skywarp, or you might have taken over the world by now."

"Thanks," Skywarp smiled, completely missing the point. "I guess we should lock Megatron up somewhere till you can fix Starscream though. Because he's probably gonna execute me for doing that."

"You'll be fine," Knock Out sighed, brushing the dust off his knees and joining them in watching the Constructicons struggle to lift their unconscious leader. It was like watching a group of removal mechs try to fit an unusually-shaped couch through too narrow a doorway. "I hear Megatron has a soft spot for traitors."

Ratchet glanced at Starscream. "I'm gonna need your hands for this," he told Knock Out. "And any others we can get hold of."

"You're going to need a *miracle*," Knock Out scoffed. "Parts or no, *this* was the most I dared do. I'm not sure how much more his spark can take."

"Believe me," Ratchet shared a smirk with Skywarp. "His spark can take a lot."

Blue Went Out Of Style Two Centuries Ago

Starscream was looking better. 'Better' meaning less like the burnt out remains of an incinerated car and a little more like the seeker he had been before.

Knock Out had thrown every cooling pad the repair-bay had at him the second Megatron had laid him across the table and now, hours later, he had cooled to a reasonable temperature. But it wasn't without a cost. The sudden fluctuations in temperature had left Starscream's armour warped and cracked. It was weakened, unfit for purpose.

"I've wanted to get my servos on his frame for years, you know," Knock Out told him after a few hours of silence, finally in a workable rhythm enough to strike up a conversation.

Ratchet didn't lift his head where he was crouched close behind Starscream's helm, carefully placing the new processor into an empty cranium.

"...Really," he hummed, reluctant to take part in where this conversation sounded like it was heading.

"Interesting where your mind wanders, but you've misunderstood," Knock Out reassured, amused.

He was still removing sections of armour-plating. It was taking a while to get them off, using extra care not to further damage Starscream's protoform underneath. "I specialised in cosmetic alternations during my studies. Mostly automobile, but I have always wanted to use my skills on a seeker. They're so versatile. It's a shame the Commander allowed himself to be limited by his Earth altmode."

Ratchet rolled his optics, "Cosmetics can wait. So can his armour. It's not like he'll be going out to battle anytime soon and considering the extent of the work we need to do, no one's going to be too scandalised if we leave his wires showing a day or two."

Knock Out held up his hands, "If you're volunteering to tell him we didn't prioritise his appearance when he wakes up, fine."

Ratchet span on his stool and plucked the memory drive containing Starscream's back up off the equipment table. He began the laborious, complicated process of connecting the wires and cables between it and the new brain module, huffing impatiently that everything was taking him so much longer with just the one hand. The stump had no dexterity, and every time he tried to use it to keep something steady he nearly dropped it.

He was beginning to think he should have let Knock Out give him a hook after all.

"This shade of blue went out of style two centuries ago," Knock Out was shaking his head at a little patch of paint that had survived the ordeal, on armour taken from Starscream's wrist. "Sky blue and *cherry* red? I've never seen such an unflattering combination. Far too immature for a mech his age. Crimson would suit him better, don't you think?"

"Why are you asking me?" Ratchet muttered.

"Why you?" Knock Out tossed the armour plate into the air and caught it casually before setting it aside with the rest. "Because you sent Breakdown into the office next door to sit on Megatron and I've no one else to talk to."

Ratchet grunted, poking at Starscream's brain module to root out any connectivity issues. Looked good, so far.

"And what if Megatron wakes up?" He posed to Knock Out. "Would you rather he spring up halfway through his repairs and be free to come barreling back in here to raise a Hell just so you can have your boyfriend to talk to? Because I'll remind you, *you're* the one standing closest to the door."

"Soundwave is closest to the door, if you want to get technical," Knock Out nodded towards the unconscious Third In Command.

Before Ratchet could answer that he had no intention of allowing Knock Out to use poor unconscious Soundwave as a living shield against Megatron's unfaltering rage, his comm pinged. For the fifth time in an hour. He answered it wirelessly.

"What now?"

"*We're finished,*" Scrapper's voice came over the comm. "*Patched his arm up, good as new-*"

"He still out?"

"*Pretty outta it,*" the sound of Scrapper grunting like he as lifting something came through the speaker. "*Crusher just banged his head against the doorway and that didn't wake up...*"

Ratchet's denta ground together. "Well done," he praised sarcastically.

"*Hook wants to know if we should give him some more energon. His tanks are at fourteen percent.*"

"Not yet, we don't want them getting higher than twenty for a while," Ratchet advised, ignoring Knock Out's judgmentally raised brow. "He might wake up with a power boost. We're barely halfway through with Starscream and I want to get him to a decent point before Megatron see's him again. He might be ...more reasonable that way."

There was a long pause on the other end. Ratchet was about slap at the comm, thinking the connection was faulty, when Scrapper's voice came again, hesitant, "*...He gonna be okay?*"

Ratchet took in Starscream's upside-down, patchy face. Somewhere below, his exposed spark was pulsing bright and unbothered. He smirked to himself. "He's gonna be fine. Be up and harassing everyone before you know it."

Scrapper made some dismissive noise on the other end, "*Not worried about him or anything, just- just Megatron'd be unbearable if anything happened.*"

"Yeah, sure," Ratchet allowed him his denial. "I need most of you back here when you're done shifting Megatron. But in case he does start to come 'round, leave someone with him in his quarters-"

Ratchet very clearly heard the desperate chorus of '*Not It's*' from the rest of the gestalt carry through the comm speakers. Scrapper, last to speak and therefore saddled with the responsibility, cursed loudly and cut the comm.

When the remaining Constructicons returned, they could begin the heavy duty work, stripping Starscream the rest of the way down.

Knock Out and Hook removed most of Starscream's appendages so they could replace stuck or misshapen joints. Ratchet helped Bonecrusher lift Starscream into a sitting position so they could remove his wings, then immediately regretted asking the Constructicons to assist when Breakdown and Long Haul held one wing each and stood looking at each other like they were thinking about duelling with them.

"No." He said.

Longhaul turned the wing over in his hand, "You know, these could really-"

"No!"

Things were progressing better than Ratchet had expected. Knock Out's hands were as quick as his own, and the Constructicons, though more builders than medics, were proficient at taking orders. Hook's desire for perfectionism meant that though he took his time, the tasks he was set were executed to a standard Ratchet would have expected of a true medic. They may finish sooner than he expected.

And no sooner than he had thought that damningly optimistic sentiment did the worst possible interruption swoop into the repair bay.

Worst than Megatron.

As Ratchet had his back to the door he could only assume as to the identity of their visitor when the Constructicons visibly panicked and flattened themselves to the far bulkheads. Knock Out snatched the wing out of Breakdown's hand to use as a defense.

Alarmed, Ratchet glanced sideways and saw the yellow glow in his peripheral. His spark jumped into his throat.

He flung himself forward, over Starscream's exposed, vulnerable frame, "Sunstorm! You can't be in here-!"

"How does my brother fare?" Sunstorm ignored the horrified reactions to his arrival (though he was probably used to people screaming and running away from him by now) and continued his advance.

He was calm. He wasn't emitting dangerously high levels of radiation. But Ratchet could already feel the temperature creeping towards uncomfortable levels, could taste the metal on his tongue.

"Stop-stop!" Ratchet hissed, lying half on top of Starscream and scrambling for something to throw at the seeker. "He's fine! He's gonna be fine if you just stay- *stay*, stay right there."

His point seemed to get through to Sunstorm, finally. The seeker stopped, and took half a step back. And clearly felt that was enough of a concession. "He'll live?"

"Yes, he's hurt but we'll fix him up, don't worry," Ratchet slowly slid away from Starscream. "He'll be okay."

For someone who had been in such a state of turmoil just hours earlier, Sunstorm was back to his stoic, condescending, self-righteous self. Perhaps a little more emphatic than before, or at least, that's what Ratchet *thought* before he opened his mouth.

"Excellent. He has passed the test."

"Test?" Knock Out asked warily.

"Primus has deemed him worthy," Sunstorm smiled softly, proud. Ratchet let out a long breath. Sunstorm should really be *thanking* Primus that Megatron was currently unconscious and had no way of hearing any of this.

"Sunstorm," he began.

"-he has gifted Starscream with a second chance after repenting-"

"Repented? Starscream?" Hook grimaced.

"Sunstorm, don't go in-!" Five minutes too late, Thundercracker came running through the doorway at full speed, skidding to a hasty stop when he saw the glow of yellow all too close, but stumbling towards it anyway when Skywarp ran into the back of him.

Sunstorm was considerate enough to step further into the room to prevent Thundercracker from falling face first into his radioactive cockpit.

"Well done you two!" Ratchet barked at them. "You had *one* job. I told you to keep *him* out of here! And where's Drift?!"

"Who's Drift!" Thundercracker mumbled.

"He means me," Drift swept into the room after them, looking stern and stressed. Ratchet imagined the last few hours hadn't been any easier for the Volunteer Sunstorm Containment Unit than they had been for the medics.

"Sunstorm, you're needed elsewhere," Drift lied easily.

"Where I am needed is here," Sunstorm didn't even look at him. "Watching over my brother, as another of Primus's children-"

"Sunstorm, I'm not above throwing things," Ratchet warned, picking up a wrench, "And I'm told I have excellent aim."

"S'okay Ratch, I got this," Skywarp offered with arrogant confidence, lifting his hands. He was clearly still high on his inflated sense of heroism after his flawless take down of Megatron. Which meant this wasn't going to end well.

Ratchet was right to worry, as Skywarp's *solution* to the Sunstorm problem was to pull a long stick out of his subspace -a *wooden* stick. He jabbed it at Sunstorm like he was trying to ward off a particularly tenacious goose. "Back! Get back-!"

Sunstorm looked at the stick with a considering expression. Skywarp thrust it at him again, trying to herd him backwards, out the door, so Sunstorm grabbed the end of it. It ignited instantly, orange flames licking over Skywarp's hand. Skywarp screamed in surprise and flung it away. Bonecrusher ducked the flaming projectile with a curse.

"When will my brother wake?" Sunstorm asked Ratchet as if none of that had just happened, ignoring Skywarp resentfully sucking on his singed fingers.

"When *I* decide to wake him up," Ratchet told him. "And I'm not forcing him online and making him experience any more discomfort than necessary just so you can say hi and spout nonsense about how microwaving him was actually just Primus offering him salvation."

"We have things to discuss," Sunstorm insisted. "Arrangements must be made."

"Sunstorm," Ratchet pinched the bridge of his nose, "I swear to Primus..."

"You can discuss them with me," Thundercracker offered, slapping Skywarp's hand away from his face when his trinemate tried to get sympathy out of him. "I'm trine, remember."

"*You* cannot help me," Sunstorm turned his nose up at him. "And your manufactured 'relationship' with my brother is of no interest to me."

"Alright," Ratchet thought it best to intervene before someone *else* lost their hand punching him. Thundercracker and Skywarp looked less than happy with Sunstorm's view on their trineship with Starscream.

"Sunstorm, I understand you're eager to find a way to contain all that excess radiation, but you're going to have to wait until I can give an all clear. Because in case you haven't noticed, Starscream doesn't have *limbs* at the moment."

Sunstreaker looked confused, "'*Get rid*' of my Primus given gifts? Why would I allow anyone to do such a thing?"

Ratchet didn't have time to unpack all that just yet. And only Starscream knew what he and Sunstorm had discussed up in the clouds. Rather than ruin all the tentatively made progress with Sunstorm, he looked to Drift standing behind the seeker, and decided to turf this problem off on him instead.

"Just- oh look, Deadlock's not busy. Why don't you go and tell him how great Primus is?"

Sunstorm hesitated, golden optics darting to Starscream, "My brother needs me-"

"Not as much as Deadlock does. He's a heathen, you know," Ratchet added, dropping his voice to something conspiratorial.

That sold him. Sunstorm nodded understandingly and turned to survey Drift. Whatever he saw there gave him cause to shake his helm. "No spark is beyond salvation," he told Drift, not unkindly.

The *look* Drift sent Ratchet could have burst him into flame as effectively as any gamma radiation Sunstorm himself might have unleashed.

Thundercracker and Skywarp stumbled over each other to stay out Sunstorm's path, "Come heathen, let us discuss your sins."

"Lock the doors," Ratchet advised Mixmaster once their unwanted visitors were safely outside. "If Sunstorm wants to get back in here he'll have to melt the locks..."

There came a point, after endless hours of labour, where Ratchet was finally able to take a step back and watch Starscream's chest rise and fall with deep, healthy intakes of air. The new fuel pump was chugging along smoothly, pushing energon through clean, clear lines supplied by the shiny fuel tank they'd just installed, which read almost full, at ninety-five percent. The highest it had probably been since the start of the war, perhaps even before then. Ratchet was most pleased

with the brain module, responding to test evaluations quickly and accurately.

Starscream's spark pulsed with bright flares of light, as pure and untouched as a new-sparks. The temptation to explore it's properties was there, but Ratchet knew it would have to wait. At least until Starscream was conscious enough to answer his questions.

He dropped back onto his work stool with a heavy breath. Most of the Constructicons had retired for the meantime and now only Knock Out and Hook remained with him. There was still a way to go -they were essentially rebuilding every bolt and sensor of Starscream's frame. If they'd had had a spare seeker-frame lying around it would have been a (far from simple but certainly quicker) matter of just transplanting Starscream's infallible spark into it.

And some mecha were more attached to their bodies than others. Starscream was known to be vain. Which would mean waking up with missing armour plates and without his wings was going to be difficult enough for Starscream as it was.

But at least he *would* be waking up.

"We can take it from here if you need a break," Hook offered.

They were working on Starscream's sensory net now. Fiddly business. Ratchet's optics stung and the fingers of his only hand felt tingly and stiff with overuse. He had to keep flexing the feeling back into them. "M' fine," he mumbled.

He had no idea what time of day it was. They'd returned with Starscream just after midnight, and begun the real work a few hours after that. Megatron was still unconscious -or Ratchet *assumed* he was, there had been so panicked comm calls to suggest otherwise. It must have been late into the next morning by now, if not at least early afternoon.

It was a long time to wait. So with that thought in mind Ratchet was somewhat more patient with their next interruption when it came scratching at the repair-bay's locked door.

Sunstorm wouldn't have made a request for entry, and would have must melted through the door-lock -or the door itself, depending on how much of a tool he felt like being today- and Megatron would have simply blasted it down, so Ratchet felt it reasonably safe to answer himself.

And found himself staring at an empty corridor.

He jumped like an electrocuted Insecticon when several something's began shoving past his legs an instant later. He grabbed the doorframe to keep from being bowled over, catching a glimpse of a black tail swishing by.

"What-hey!"

"Boss!"

Rumble and Frenzy were making a beeline for Soundwave's berth, Ravage slinking in after them. Ratchet opened his mouth to bark at them not to clamber all over their carrier and knock his repairs loose when the two flight-capable cassettes soared in after them, swooping low over an unprepared Ratchet and causing him to flail.

"For Primus sake!" He snapped heatedly, slapping the access panel to seal the door shut before any more of them came running through. "Visiting time is over. We're busy in here. Starscream is-"

"We don't care about Starscream," Rumble argued, standing on the very tips of his toe-pedes to see

Soundwave. "Hey, Boss-?" he reached up to shake an arm.

Soundwave, still in a recovery stasis, remained unresponsive.

"Stop pulling on him," Ratchet admonished, brushing small but strong hands away. He pulled his work stool over for them to climb onto, but his gesture seemed to imply to Ravage that it was acceptable for *him* to leap onto the berth.

"Don't- oh whatever..." Ratchet gave up with a sigh when Ravage hissed softly and carefully navigated the free space on the berth to reach Soundwave's helm. He nudged lightly at his carrier's visor with his nose. Buzzsaw and Lazerbeak landed to perch on the equipment above him.

It was the quietest Ratchet had ever seen them, standing vigil over their carrier.

He glanced back to ensure Knock Out and Hook were too busy working to pay much attention to what he was doing before unspooling his cable and hooking up to Soundwave. Starscream had vacuumed up the majority of their attention since coming in. It was only right someone spared a moment to check on the Third in Command's progress.

The abundance of new fuel was working miracles. Soundwave's self repair was well ahead of schedule.

"When will he wake up?" Frenzy's sad little voice asked.

Ratchet used his connection to begin deactivating Soundwave's stasis-lock, "Now."

Eager faces lit up. Ravage began snuffling at Soundwave's masked face as his carrier's secondary systems began to come online. When fingers twitched on the berth Ratchet disengaged from Soundwave and moved away to give them a small semblance privacy, smirking to himself when he heard Soundwave's weary vocaliser drone a quiet, "Ravage; desist."

Ravage did no such thing, shoving his head under Soundwave's chin and flopping onto his side, tail swishing wildly. Ratchet didn't have the spark to shoo him off.

"So Sunstorm tried to melt your ass, huh?" Rumble was heard asking as Ratchet pretended to study an inconsequential data-pad.

"Negative. Soundwave; superior." Ratchet looked back at them and watched a shaky hand lift and cup the back of Frenzy's helm. "He was no match for me."

"There was a hole in your gut that said otherwise," Ratchet called over, unable to help himself.

Soundwave's visor swivelled toward's him questioningly, but Ratchet found himself speaking still, demanding answers. "What were you doing so close to him anyway? For him to give you a contact burn like that you must have walked right up to him." He set the data-pad down heavily and stood with his arms folded. "Not even Megatron was stupid enough to do that."

"...I was attempting to influence Sunstorm through mental cohesion," Soundwave admitted.

"Worked well."

"Sunstorm was stronger than I anticipated." Soundwave explained reluctantly, perhaps even a little ashamed of himself for not having seen it coming. "He recognised my presence in his mind, and accused me of attempting to corrupt him. He pushed me away. Quite literally."

He glanced at his torso, where an unattractive patch of new armour was awaiting cosmetic work.

"Well you gave Megatron a scare," Ratchet decided to make him feel guilty for his stupidity anyway. "To say nothing of your cassettes-"

"Why did you leave us behind, Boss?" Rumble asked angrily. "I coulda taken him-"

Soundwave patiently laid his hand over Rumble's head to silence him, still looking to Ratchet. "Megatron is in great distress."

Ratchet felt as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him. His comm was already halfway to his mouth when he asked, "He's not woken up-!?"

"He has not." Soundwave held up a hand to calm him. "Recharge; is not offering Megatron peace. You are in danger. Megatron blames you for Starscream's condition."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Starscream; does not."

"Doesn't what?"

"Blame you."

Ratchet took a step back to reveal the seeker in question, still in the midst of extensive repairs and in no condition to contemplating who was and wasn't to blame. The cassettes stirred curiously, craning their necks to see.

"And how would you know what Starscream thinks?"

"I can sense it," Soundwave informed confidently.

Ratchet gave it some thought. "...Can you tell me if his head's screwed on right at least? We had to give him a new brain module, among other things."

"It is fine," Soundwave didn't have to consider his question for long, which was a good thing, he supposed. "But Starscream may not be when he wakes and sees himself. Starscream; vain."

"He'll get over it," Ratchet muttered. "Megatron might not though. I don't think he'll ever forgive me."

"Irrelevant. Starscream will not let him harm you."

Ratchet rolled his optics at the demeaning idea of hiding from Megatron's wrath behind Starscream's wings- not that the seeker currently *had* any. "Let's hope so. Because I doubt I have anywhere else to go at this point."

Soundwave was quiet for a moment. Ratchet couldn't sense his presence rooting through his mind, but he knew Soundwave was probing at it, poking to see what might fall out. He glared and shuttered his thoughts as best he could, but Soundwave-

"Perhaps it is for the best," Soundwave's visor dimmed. "You are better suited to the Decepticon cause, than that of the Autobots."

Ratchet's glare deepened, "Go the frag back to sleep."

At some point Ratchet had to admit defeat and take his own advice. It was a blow to his already battered ego to admit, but Knock Out and Hook were younger mechs, with higher stamina. Breakdown made the surprisingly logical argument that as the lead medic he needed to be in good form should an unexpected complication occur. Starscream's spark flickering, or his system rejecting a new part.

He fell face first across his berth in an undignified sprawl, telling himself he'd move into a more acceptable position in a moment. He must have fallen into recharge like that anyway. He was stiff and aching when his door opened two hours later and a repentant Drift knelt by the berth to shake his shoulder.

Ratchet groaned, not bothering to peel his face away from the berth top to look at him.

"I'm awake," he sighed when Drift shook him again.

"So's Megatron."

That woke him up. He shoved himself upright, glaring at Drift through stinging optics. "For frag's sake, *why?*!"

"Scrapper refuelled him when his tanks dropped below six percent," Drift explained, "Perhaps a little too generously, because two minutes later he was up and pointing his cannon at his head. He's back in the repair bay. They couldn't keep him out."

Ratchet rubbed a hand over his face and sat up, swinging his legs to the floor, "Has he killed anyone?"

"No," Drift placed a hand on his shoulder to keep him there. "So it's fine, you can recharge. I'll stay here with you in case he should he get it into his mind to pay you a visit."

"Oh, so you're going to take Megatron on in hand-to-hand combat?" Ratchet smiled tightly. "I hear you're good, but Megatron-

-is no match for Skywarp's *hand* from what *I* hear," Drift fixed him with a look of sheer disbelief. "Did you ask him to do that?"

"Of course not. I didn't know he could!"

"Neither does Megatron. He thinks someone shot him in the back of the head. Soundwave's pleading ignorance because he was unconscious, but he can sense a guilty spark from ten lightyears away. Megatron thinks he's in on it."

Ratchet lifted Drift's hand away from his shoulder, squeezing his fingers before releasing them, "I need to get down there."

"You don't."

"I do," Ratchet stood, "I need to wake Starscream up and give him a distraction, before he accuses half the faction of treachery and has everyone lined up and shot."

"Knock Out can do that," Drift insisted. "You've already done your part. You don't need to be

involved in every little decision. Particularly those that involve Megatron standing over your shoulder, waiting for the moment he won't need you anymore."

Ratchet knew the riskiest part was over. That the time Starscream was most likely to suffer from complications had passed, and that he would be putting himself in needless danger by insisting he be in the room when Starscream came round. But he *wanted* to be there. Why should he let Megatron chase him out when he'd been the one to spend the last *seventeen hours* working his digits stiff to fix him.

It was probably selfish, insisting on going.

But it was his prerogative, as the lead medic, to be the first to call a recovering patient an idiot.

Even if Starscream's injuries weren't *entirely* his fault.

"I'm going to be there," he stood his ground.

Drift stared at him. "Why are you like this?"

"Like what?" Ratchet slipped by him, feigning ignorance.

"I think you know what," he heard Drift mutter, following him back to the repair bay anyway.

Ratchet had become nose-blind to the noxious stench of burnt rubber and metal in the hours he had spent repairing Starscream. Reentering the repair-bay now the lingering scent hit him anew, mingling with the sting of chemicals and energon from the repair work.

Starscream had everything reattached save for his wings and the smallest sections of armour plates that needed the most accurate handling, leaving him with bare digits and gawping seams. He wasn't finished, but at least his modesty had been restored and his features preserved. Though Knock Out had made a few adjustments to the fit of his armour, Ratchet could tell already, even without any of the paint.

Hopefully, when Starscream woke he would focus more on being alive than he would on his new figure. Megatron certainly did.

And thank Primus for Megatron's emotional constipation, Ratchet thought to himself, taking care to keep himself out of Megatron's direct line of sight when he joined Knock Out at one of the medical monitors.

He stole a glimpse of him; Megatron leaning over Starscream, back bowed and shoulders hunched up to his audials, gripping the berth edge as he searched the seeker's face for signs of consciousness. There was none of the devastation that had ruled his expression earlier, just restless anxiety.

"We're rebooting him now," Knock Out offered quietly. "Lord Megatron insisted."

Ratchet refrained from insulting Megatron aloud for his selfish impatience.

Starscream's lips parted with a soft breath. And Megatron seemed to deflate before Ratchet's very optics, shoulders dropping, shrinking from the looming, vengeful mountain into a weary, exhausted

mech, his expression collapsing along with the strength of his voice. "Starscream?"

There was no response. The readouts indicated that Starscream's brain module was still evaluating it's new frame, it's new spark. His processor was aware of them, but the rest of him was playing catchup to respond.

"Starscream, do you know where you are?" Ratchet asked after a moment.

Megatron head snapped up, aware of his presence for the first time and shocked by his boldness.

But Starscream stirred and swallowed, stealing Megatron's attention back. "...Hmm."

Ratchet took that noise as an affirmation. "Can you remember what happened? Starscream?"

"...Sunstorm," Starscream groaned after a lengthy pause, brow creasing unhappily. "...The idiot *sautéed* me."

Optics flickered online for the first time in hours, lenses whirring as they refocused. But they hadn't expected to find Megatron's sombre face *directly* over above him though. Starscream flinched back and shut them again with a hoarse curse. "*Megatron-!?*"

"Do not concern yourself with Sunstorm," Megatron said fiercely, leaning in to more thoroughly invade the poor seeker's space. "I shall deal with him."

"Urgh, stop it," Starscream lifted a skeletal hand to shove him away, "You smell *awful*-"

"That smell's you, Commander," a relieved Knock Out informed him. "Barbecued seeker isn't much of a pleasant aroma."

Starscream's startled look of horror was enough to prompt an aggressive snarl of warning out of a rather overprotective Megatron. Knock Out looked away quickly, busying himself with another task. Ratchet just wanted to smack the warlord around the back of the head. A little teasing wasn't going to send Starscream into relapse.

Starscream's brow creased, "Why do I feel so-"

He sat up before anyone could stop him. Optics widened in shock when he looked down at himself, at his *armour*, riddled with gaps, reshaped, and unpainted as it was. Un-armoured hands shot out to try and cover himself, but seeing as they were bared as well-

"What- where's- my armour!"

"Starscream-" Ratchet tried.

"I look like that Terminator thing!" Starscream protested, "From that awful movie you made us all watch! I thought you were *repairing* me-"

"You are lucky to be alive." It was Megatron who reminded him of such a fact, loudly. The severity of his tone stopped Starscream's tantrum in it's tracks, sobering the mood.

Starscream looked cowed, but still upset. He sat up and drew his legs to his chest huffily, hugging them. "Not as lucky as you think," he muttered under his breath. Ratchet glared at him.

"What work is there to be done?" Megatron asked. He was addressing Knock Out, but he didn't lift his gaze from his sulking Air Commander.

Knock Out cleared his vocaliser, "Mostly cosmetic. His wings, remaining armour, weapons systems, and a few non-vital hardware issues. We were going to give his self-repair a few hours to kick-in and adjust to the changes before finishing off the rest-"

"Good," Megatron nodded in understanding. "Then Starscream will be returning to his quarters for the night."

'His' quarters meaning 'their' quarters. Meaning Megatron wanted to be *alone* with him. Starscream suddenly seemed to sense he was in trouble.

"No I won't," he said quickly, looking to Ratchet pleadingly. "I still feel unwell. I'll need to stay overnight for monitoring, won't I medic? After all, I was nearly *killed*-"

"Oh I don't know, Starscream," Ratchet smiled, finding an unprofessional joy in Starscream's predicament. "I think it'd take a *lot* to extinguish *that* spark. You're well on your way to making a full recovery."

Starscream clenched his denta, "I think I should stay here, with *witnesses*-"

Megatron caught his chin, silencing Starscream's protests. His touch was light and unforced, but Starscream couldn't seem to escape it anyway. He seemed frozen by the intensity of Megatron's gaze.

"Don't assume your injuries have excused you from the consequences of your actions," Megatron reminded coldly, but not dangerously. It was clear he was still upset. Maybe even too upset to be truly angry. "You defied my orders-"

Starscream wrinkled his nose, "Aren't you used to that by now?"

Megatron stroked a thumb over his cheek before releasing him and straightening. "Come." He nodded to the door. "I have things to say to you that I'm sure you would prefer stayed private."

Starscream paled and Ratchet thought he was going to make another attempt to get out of it. So it surprised him when Starscream swung his legs down to stand. The seeker took his own weight and swayed, not weakened, but severely unbalanced.

"What on Cybertron-?" He complained, looking back at where his wings should have been and realising why. "Where are my wings!?"

Knock Out lifted one up, all it's wiring still exposed, "I'm still working on them, Commander."

Starscream grabbed his helm dramatically, "I can't *walk* like this!"

"No matter," said Megatron.

Before Starscream could do anything to stop him, Megatron bent down in front of him and grabbed him about the hips. Starscream slammed his hands against Megatron's broad shoulders to try and push him back, but it was too late. He was hitched up and brought to Megatron's front, an arm supporting him under the aft and another locked around his back. To foil any attempts at escape.

"I didn't mean I couldn't walk *literally*," Starscream hissed, frozen with humiliation.

Megatron paid him no mind, turning to survey Ratchet briefly. "My gratitude today is sparing your life. Pray I feel the same tomorrow."

He turned to leave with Starscream looking over his shoulder, who merely tightened his arms around the neck of his captor in defeat and rolled his optics at Ratchet like he didn't think Megatron was being serious.

But why would he? *He'd* slept through the whole exhausting, stressful, *hateful* day.

Primus, Ratchet envied him.

Megatron Liked The Blue

Chapter Notes

This is a bit of a filler chapter before the plot picks back up again. Sorry guys.

Ratchet did his best to keep to himself in the days after, hiding away in the repair-bay, finally finding the time to focus on the damages taken on by the Rainmakers during the unfortunate night Sunstorm had had his almost-meltdown.

Their self-repair had dealt with the minor burns. It was just the underside of Acid Storm's left wing that had to be rewired and reshaped where he'd been caught in one of Sunstorm's heat flares. And Nova Storm, who's bum leg had nothing to do with Sunstorm, as she had somehow been struck by lightning.

Ion Storm insisted it had nothing to do with him.

"I'm telling you, it wasn't me!" he argued crossly, arms tight across his chest.

"I believe you," Nova Storm said generously, reclined across the repair berth with her leg stuck into the air at a ninety-degree angle.

"I don't," Slipstream glared at him venomously.

"You really think I'd electrocute my own trine-mate?"

"I think it was dark up there and Nova looks enough like Sunstorm that you just saw yellow and *fired*," Slipstream arched a brow.

Ion Storm's shoulders hunched defensively, "...Well I didn't do it on purpose."

"Most people would say sorry after striking someone with three-hundred-million volts of electricity," Ratchet murmured, only half following their argument as he patched Nova Storm up.

"It was an accident!" Ion Storm exclaimed.

"That doesn't mean you don't have to say sorry," Ratchet shot him a look over Nova Storm's leg.

"Only if you're an Autobot," Ion Storm protested stubbornly, "Decepticons don't apologise. It makes them look weak-"

"They do in *my* medbay," Ratchet snapped dangerously, tool held aloft, "if they know what's good for them.

There was a pause, before "...Sorry Nova," he heard Ion Storm grumble unenthusiastically.

If the seeker he been an Autobot, Ratchet would have made him do it again, properly, with sincerity and eye-contact, not glaring down at his own feet. Seeing as he was only a Decepticon Ratchet decided to let it slide. It was progress, and getting an apology at all from a Con was nothing to dismiss easily.

"Don't worry Ion', I barely felt it," Nova Storm accepted the subpar apology with all the good nature Ratchet had come to expect of her.

The distraction of the Rainmaker's repairs meant Knock Out was left unsupervised with Starscream's wings for some hours. When Ratchet returned to see his progress, he found Knock Out had altered their shape, compacted the spars and slimmed down the ribs to improve aerodynamics. There were some unnecessary additions though; the slats were curved and the winglets were pointier.

Granted, even Ratchet could see they improved the overall aesthetics, but as vain as Starscream was, he placed more stock in performance.

"He's not going to like them," Ratchet warned.

"He'll get used to them," Knock Out smirked. "He's been without wings two days. I could hand him two pieces of sheet metal and he'd still wear them at this point. Anything's better than walking around without wings and looking like a 'ground pounder'."

"What was he like yesterday?" Ratchet asked in the most casual tone he could manage.

Knock Out shrugged, "Like Starscream."

Ratchet glared, he had been rather hoping for more information than that.

Starscream had been hidden away in his quarters since waking up, on forced bed-rest. Knock Out had been seeing him twice daily, reassembling the intricate panels of his armour, bit by bit. Wings were more complicated though, so if Starscream wanted them reattached he would have to find a way to compel Megatron into ending his house-arrest.

Ratchet wanted to see how he was progressing for himself. But somehow inviting himself into Megatron's private quarters seemed too much like a suicide mission to go through with.

It was odd though, going about his day uninterrupted by the usual Starscream-related-drama. Sunstorm was a decent understudy, and unable to get in to see Starscream himself (thanks to the resolute efforts of the airforce who knew letting Sunstorm anywhere near Megatron would result in a death toll) regularly bothered him instead. During his frequent visits he had become rather taken with Drift though, and listening to the two of them debate the teaching of Primus was grating on Ratchet's nerves.

Luckily, Soundwave's brush with deactivation had finally spurred Shockwave into action on the Sunstorm-front, and Ravage stopped by to deliver Ratchet additional files on not just his blueprints but spark data as well.

They were much more extensive. Shockwave had run his own tests on Sunstorm's spark, measuring it's radioactive output and *attempting* to scan it. It's frequency sat in the same register as Starscream's, but was that enough to assume he and Sunstorm were brothers? Without a successful scan, they couldn't know for sure. And no scanner had yet been invented with the durability to withstand the full, unshielded brunt of Sunstorm's spark.

Hopefully he'd have more success with the physical frame.

Mixmaster was an experienced chemist and eager to offer Ratchet his assistance, abandoning all his current projects. It made Ratchet wonder when the Constructicon had last worked on a project that didn't involve bizarre world-conquering plots. Megatron was something of a tactical prodigy when it came to warfare, almost as much as Prowl, but when it came to almost anything but, he

was a complete idiot.

And Ratchet got the impression that Mixmaster was one more harebrained scheme to invent a scientifically-impossible potion from defecting.

"I don't know much about radiation," Mixmaster admitted regrettably, as Ratchet sent him a copy of the blueprints through a comm channel.

"Me neither," Ratchet sighed. "But at this point I'm not so much worried about fixing Sunstorm as I am about just giving him the ability to control it."

"You think it's something that can be fixed?" Mixmaster looked at him, stunned.

"Maybe. But not if I can't figure out a way to get near him without bursting into flame." Ratchet looked through the listed materials Shockwave had used in building Sunstorm's frame; lead, lead, and a lot more lead. "Besides, Sunstorm doesn't want to be fixed."

"He's crazy."

"He's a fanatic, but I doubt he online'd that way," Ratchet reminded him. "No one is sparked an extremist."

"Wow," Mixmaster shook his helm, taking in the listed materials for himself. "He must weigh a mega-tonne, carrying all those extra layers around his spark-"

"And it's still not anywhere near enough," Ratchet rubbed his helm in exhaustion. "You think you could synthesise a more resistant alternative? This is a mineral rich planet, so we're in the best place for it."

"I'll need help," Mixmaster looked at him.

"Don't look at me," Ratchet pointed him away. "You'll need to collaborate with Starscream."

"If I can get hold of him, sure." Mixmaster mumbled.

"He should be back in here tomorrow, for his wings. But he still needs his weapons systems going over so I can't imagine Megatron allowing him back onto active duty for a while yet. He'll have plenty free time to help while he's stuck around the base, doing nothing."

"You can't just reactive them now?" Mixmaster asked, "I thought he was pretty much fixed?"

"It's not Starscream's progress that's slowing him down, it's Megatron's." Ratchet closed down the open data-files on Sunstorm before they could give him a headache. "He's being stubborn."

Mixmaster rolled his optics too, and Ratchet felt an odd kinship with him. At least he wasn't the only one who thought Megatron a coddler.

When Starscream finally did make his first public appearance since being dramatically carried off in Megatron's arms, it was no surprise to see Megatron following a half-step behind him. Ratchet was in sight of the doors when they opened pre-emptively upon the seeker's arrival, causing Starscream to stop short, apparently in surprise.

Ratchet wondered where else Starscream would have expected him to be.

There wasn't time to voice this question as 0.2 seconds after Starscream had stopped did Megatron walk straight into the back of him, too close to break before the collision. Starscream stumbled forwards with a scowl, but when he turned around he looked past Megatron, into the empty corridor.

"Oh, hello Sunstorm," he said to the air.

Megatron whipped around, cannon fired-up and ready to face the nonexistent threat. Starscream pressed the access panel to close the door on him, lightening fast fingers entering a ten digit code Ratchet didn't recognise to activate the lock. The panel turned red a moment before they heard Megatron's attempt to get in on the other side, but whatever code he used was rejected with an obnoxiously negative beep.

There was then a loud *thump* that was probably an angry Megatron punching the bulkhead.

"I see why you're running late," Ratchet commented casually, glancing at his chrono again.

"He didn't want me to come," Starscream explained, crossing the repair-bay. Without his wings and the sense of balance they provided, he lacked his usual strut, and some of the confidence that normally came with it.

"If it were up to him, I'd stay a wingless-freak for the rest of the war, all because *he's* paranoid," he continued to complain.

Ratchet tried not to feel hurt, "Does he really think I'd try and hurt you?"

"*Please*, as if you could," Starscream shot him an amused look. He boosted himself up onto the berth.

"It's not so much as you, as..." He trailed off with a wave of his hand. "I don't know what's gotten into him. He seems to think everyone's out to betray him. Everyone but me. I should be offended. I mean, how *far* down his threat scale have I fallen if I'm suddenly less dangerous than you? Than *Skywarp*?!"

"You should probably ask your trine about that," Ratchet advised, keeping his expression carefully neutral as he gestured for Starscream to lie on his front. "That's if you ever manage to lose your new bodyguard."

"There'll be no getting rid of him. He'll be pacing outside that door until I come out. You know I can't even take a *shower* in peace? I come out to find him with his audial pressed up against the door, like he expects Sunstorm to crawl up through the drain pipe and melt my feet off," Starscream pillowed his head in his arms.

"In that case I'll keep my voice down," Ratchet began opening up the armour on Starscream's back to get to the relevant wires. His plating was a flashy, darker red; the crimson Knock Out had picked out for him. Ratchet didn't know much about current fashions but he had to admit, it looked nice.

"Don't bother," Starscream's voice was muffled by his arms. "He'll know all my secrets by now."

Not all, Ratchet thought privately. Aloud, he hummed thoughtfully, "We couldn't get him away from you while we were working. He was a real in the aft, you know."

"I've heard," Starscream sighed wearily. "What a sap. I can't believe I have to conjunx him."

Ratchet paused. "...So that's what you discussed with him after you woke up?"

"What?" Starscream stirred, side-eyeing him. "Oh, no. No, he doesn't know yet." To Ratchet's confused expression he explained, "I swore to Sunstorm that I would let Megatron make an honest mech of me and finally *'abandon my whoreish ways'*."

"What else did you promise him?"

"To stop blaspheming, but he's not a complete idiot so I'm sure he knows that was an empty promise"

"Of course," Ratchet retrieved one of the wings. "You agreed to a minor thing like conjuxing, but Primus-forbid you have to stop taking the creator god's name in vain-"

"If he really my brother?" Starscream interrupted suddenly.

Ratchet shrugged, reluctant to voice his own doubts in case Sunstorm lost the favour of the only mech currently standing between him and Megatron's fusion cannon. Asides from himself, of course. But somehow Ratchet doubted he'd be much of a deterrent.

"Soundwave seems to think so, and Shockwave would have corrected him if otherwise."

He began affixing the wing, a struggle to do one handed, having to direct Starscream to lean towards him so he could rest the wing against his chest. He needed a replacement hand, even just a temporary one. But there was always someone else that needed his attention, needed his skills. He'd find the time eventually.

"We're nothing alike," Starscream was frowning.

"You're very alike," Ratchet muttered, hooking Starscream's wing into place to begin on the wiring. "You're both loud, unreasonable, over-emotional, always pushing your opinions onto others-"

"Yes, you're very *funny*," Starscream growled beneath him. "But you seem to have forgotten that I have a compromised warlord at my disposal, standing right outside that door."

Ratchet continued to work, unbothered by empty threats, "Somehow I don't see Megatron killing me because I sassed you."

"If I can order him *not* to kill someone I can certainly order him to do the opposite." Starscream protested,

"I'm not suggesting Megatron wouldn't kill me, because he wouldn't necessarily need *you* asking it of him for it to happen. I'm just questioning your resolve in giving that order."

"My resolve? I've killed thousands." He boasted. "You think I'd lose sleep over one sad old Autobot who ran his mouth?"

"You like me too much to have me killed, Starscream."

A snort, "No, I don't."

"Well that's a shame, because I like you too much to ever see you hurt."

Starscream was silent, blinking rapidly. He looked away, hiding his face in his arms. "I suppose you're not completely intolerable. You have your uses."

"That, and I still have a wing left to attach," Ratchet pointed out, moving to collect the second one.

Starscream rolled over to take a look at the first, optics narrowing. He flicked it angrily, "What does Knock Out think I am? His mannequin? I didn't consent to these changes-"

"Why do you think I'm fitting them and not him?" Ratchet came back with the second in his hand. "Besides, I think they look nice."

"You would," Starscream sneered.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Ratchet asked heatedly, "I may be older, but I still-"

"-Spend all cycle making optics at *Deadlock*," Starscream pulled a face. "And just look at him. All flash and no class-"

Ratchet hooked the next wing into place roughly, cutting Starscream off. "You sound jealous to me."

Starscream cackled humourlessly, "Don't make me laugh..."

Ratchet finished connecting the wings sooner than he would have liked. He ...enjoyed speaking with Starscream. The few moments they'd spent together together just confirmed how much he had missed his company.

He kept those thoughts to himself, stepping back to let Starscream down and watching as the seeker rolled back and forth on his heels to test the weight of the wings, grumbling under his breath as he made his own adjustments. It seemed they were satisfactory, as he didn't start throwing a tantrum and instead stood with his neck craned back to admire the way they moved, gears whirring loudly as he tested their mobility.

Ratchet folded his arms, "Yes, they're very pretty."

Starscream froze, looking caught. He straightened up and cleared his vocaliser, "I'll need a repaint. As soon as you can schedule it."

"You're wearing a fresh coat. Knock Out did it himself."

"He forgot the blue," Starscream held out his now crimson hands. "I liked the blue, and further more, *Megatron* liked the blue."

Ratchet begrudgingly made a note of it. "Anything else?" He said sarcastically.

Starscream didn't pick up on it. "My digits are too short and stumpy." He added, "and I don't like this exaggerated curve on my waist-"

"Save it for Knock Out." Ratchet interrupted. "I'll have you come back in a few days for a checkup -though I'm sure I'll be seeing you again before that- and you can nitpick his design choices then. Agreed?"

Starscream nodded sharply, moving to leave. He didn't offer a thanks (no surprise there) but he did pause before the unlocking the door and facing the fretting warlord on the other side.

"You could have gone free that night with Sunstorm. You had every opportunity to leave with your

Autobot friends. No one would have stopped you."

Ratchet nodded, a lump growing in his throat, "It didn't seem right. To leave you like that."

"What was in it for you?" Starscream frowned.

"Nothing. Helping you. Knowing you'd be alright." Ratchet glared back. "Keeping you alive."

"That was stupid." Starscream said callously.

"I know."

"Your friends think you've been brainwashed. Soundwave set them right."

Ratchet's teeth were clenched together. He nodded, "How thoughtful of him."

"You can't go back now, I'm sure you realise that." Starscream continued, optics narrow and calculating. "You gave up a fairly privileged position with the Autobots; Chief Medical Officer, Prime's trusted confidant-"

"You can *stop* rubbing it in now, Starscream, you scavenger of misery," Ratchet grit out. "I'm well aware of my situation."

Starscream looked him up and down, thoughtful. "Well, I appreciate it all the same."

"I didn't do all that much. Knock Out did the most work," Ratchet waved him off, distracted by his own wandering thoughts, of the Autobots, of Sideswipe, *Optimus*...

What must they think of him now?

"I wouldn't say that. You orchestrated that smash and grab on your own medbay at the Ark," Starscream reminded him, arching a brow, "And you were the one to insist my spark could weather the stress of extensive internal repairs. If not for you, I'd still be lying on that slab, everyone standing around, waiting for me to finally flicker out of existence."

Ratchet grunted.

Starscream looked like he was having trouble saying something.

"...Thank you," he managed, grimacing at the taste the words left in his mouth. "For not spilling my secret. About my..."

"Your mutant spark?"

Starscream glared. "Resilient. *Resilient* spark." He corrected.

"Did you tell Megatron?"

"Are you insane?! Why would I do such a thing? So my spark can wind up under Shockwave's microscope?! I'm not going to give him an excuse to make *real* clones of me."

Ratchet supposed he had a point. But he somehow doubted the mech behind the door had any intention of allowing such thing.

"Go on," Ratchet waved him away. "You better get going, before Old Reliable out there breaks the door down."

Starscream was still suspicious, "You're not going to tell him-"

"No, I'm not going to tell him!" Ratchet barked, chasing him towards the door. "What kind of doctor do you think I am?!"

Starscream hit the access panel and the door swept away to reveal a wall of grey armour. Ratchet came face-to-barrel with glowing fusion and froze, stunned, before Starscream tutted and shoved the weapon to the side. "Honestly, you big brute-!"

Megatron's optics were fixed on Ratchet, burning, coal-like, and framed by dark circles from a clear lack of recharge. "I heard yelling."

If Ratchet hadn't been so wary of the fusion cannon he would have pointed out to Megatron that it was him and Starscream, so of *course* there would be yelling.

Before temptation could get the better of him and he said it anyway, Starscream was putting all of his strength into shifting Megatron out of the doorway and into the corridor, muttering about how much harder Megatron was making his life.

The cannon was still glowing ominously.

Ratchet shut and locked the door behind them, dropping against it with a breath, spark hammering away against it's chamber.

Megatron would forgive him eventually. Surely.

No one could hold a grudge forever.

Mail Service

The Decepticons drank through their energon stockpile quickly -likely the fault of the high maintenance airforce- and before long Drift and Ratchet were sat together in the mess, nursing half-rations.

"If they had just paced themselves..." Ratchet muttered under his breath.

Drift was rolling his cube from side to side, surveying his portion of fuel abysmally, "They might have been a little overzealous in the celebrating, but most of the energon went to Cybertron."

"Is anyone even still *on* Cybertron?" Ratchet looked around at the packed mess hall, full of previously Cybertron-stationed seekers and mechs Shockwave had turfed off on Megatron.

"Yeah, a few," Drift murmured into his cube.

Ratchet wasn't feeling particularly hungry. His tanks cramped in displeasure at the smell of the energon. He pushed it towards Drift. "You can have mine."

"I don't want it," Drift nudged it back.

"I'm offering it to you because I'm not feeling well," Ratchet lifted and set the cube down in front of Drift firmly. "Not because I'm trying to be a gentlemech."

"I never for a moment would have assumed *you* were trying to be a gentlemech," Drift muttered, still ignoring the cube. "And you should drink it anyway. The next ration could be smaller."

Ratchet subspaced the cube to compromise, taking note of the hungry optics glancing the unclaimed energon's way. It wouldn't be the first time a ration was snatched up by a greedy Con.

"If you're stressed, you should see Knock Out." Drift advised distantly, watching the triple-changers flex and pose around the Rainmakers and Coneheads, 'generously' offering them the dregs of their rations to try and coax them over to their table.

Ratchet's brow creased. "Why would I be stressed?"

"Do you want a list?" Drift glanced at him sympathetically. "I can hear your teeth grinding."

His pity riled Ratchet.

"I've been a medic for nearing six millennia," he reminded Drift. "Working in conditions you can't even imagine. Patching friends up in the middle of open war zones, ducking enemy fire shooting right over my helm. *This*," he gestured to the rowdy but controlled mess hall. "This is not a stressful environment."

Drift ran a finger up and down the side of his cube. "...You know what works for me?"

Ratchet shuttered his optics, "If you say meditation-"

"It would do wonders for your gasket pressure," Drift continued, undeterred. "I suggested it to Sunstorm and he said he'd never felt closer to Primus."

"I make a point to stay as far away from Primus as I physically can," Ratchet muttered. "And if you want to help with my 'stress' you can start by not encouraging Sunstorm's messiah complex."

Drift sighed in defeat. "Okay, if you say you're not stressed I believe you," he said in a tone that implied he did think he was stressed and was just trying to pacify him. "But you're still off your fuel. See Knock Out and-"

"I'm perfectly capable of diagnosing myself, thank you," Ratchet interrupted stiffly

"Aren't medics also trained to take second opinions into consideration? Besides, you were supposed to have a servo transplant a week ago," He pointed to Ratchet's stump.

"Knock Out is bogged down enough with putting Starscream's armour back the way he found it. He has better things to do than-"

"-than fix you?" Drift was glaring now. "Why do you put yourself so far down the list of priorities?"

"I don't do that."

"I've watched you do it every day I've know you," Drift lowered his voice. He leaned a little closer. His EM field, always kept so close and reserved, mingled with Ratchet's. Ratchet shivered and avoided his gaze.

"And my offer still stands," Drift continued softly, "If you want to leave, I'll come with you-"

"I can't leave." Ratchet said bluntly. "There's nowhere to go."

"There's a whole universe of possibilities out there," Drift whispered imploringly. "Galaxies full of stars and planets that have never even heard of a Cybertronian. There are more than just two paths to take; Autobot? Decepticon? We could be neither?"

Ratchet flushed at the thought of leaving, tail between his legs, "I'm not abandoning my friends."

"Which friends?" Drift's optics narrowed. "Your Autobot friends or your Decepticon ones?"

Ratchet's throat constricted. "I wear an *Autobot* badge, I am an Autobot, even if the mecha here have forgotten it." He said hotly. "*Even* if my friends have given up on me."

"What's all this then?" An amused Starscream purred, appearing before their table with the dirtiest grin imaginable. He was a glutton for discords. "Trouble in paradise?"

Ratchet realised how close he and Drift had leaned during their whispered argument. He scooted down the bench, shooting Drift a dark look that he then shared with Starscream. "And how did you escape your jail cell?"

"Easily. Megatron fell asleep," Starscream shrugged.

"Did you drug him?" Drift squinted.

Starscream laid a hand over his spark, "Why would you think a horrible thing like that?"

"Because you're smiling," Ratchet glared.

"Because I have good news." Starscream clapped his hands together and took a seat across from them, sliding onto the bench elegantly. The blue was back on his hands; the same shade of sky. It seemed Knock Out had lost that argument. "I know you've started work on the problem of Sunstorm. Mixmaster shared the files."

"Sunstorm is not a 'problem,'" Drift jumped to the absent seeker's defence. "Only his radiation is."

Starscream made a 'whatever' gesture and continued, "Mixmaster mentioned you wanted a closer look at darling Sunny's spark, and I happen to have just the thing in my lab."

"A radiation-proof spark scanner?" Ratchet raised a brow.

"A long-range scanner." Starscream corrected. "It's a prototype I built with the intention of using it for security purposes. A few tweaks, and I'm sure it'll have medical uses."

Ratchet stroked his chin thoughtfully, "I suppose we could give it a try."

Starscream steepled his fingers together, "Wonderful. I knew you'd be agreeable, and besides, if it doesn't work, or Primus-forbid, goes wrong? It's only Sunstorm-"

"Starscream," Ratchet snapped.

"Oh he'll be fine!" Starscream dismissed, "if we *are* brothers it'd take more than a malfunctioning machine to remove him from this planet."

"I'll need to scan your spark as well, if it works." Ratchet pointed at him threateningly. "Then we can finally start to unravel this mystery."

Starscream didn't look best pleased with the idea of having details about his spark on record, but his curiosity seemed to compel him into risking it. He nodded sharply. "You'll destroy the scan afterwards." He ordered.

Ratchet didn't roll his optics for fear of making him even less agreeable. "And you're due another check up-"

Impatience flitted across Starscream's expression, "I was *just* in the repair-bay-"

"Getting your hands repainted is not a checkup," Ratchet reminded him. "I better see your aft in there before the end of the week or I'll make sure a rumour gets back to Megatron that you've been sneaking out for secret night flights."

"It's a wonder you were even allowed to be an Autobot," Starscream sneered, stomping off.

Ratchet sullenly watched him stride off, clearing a path through the mess hall with his stylish new wings.

At least some of Knock Out's alterations had survived.

"So what changed your mind?" Knock Out queried, pulling up various schematics for a replacement servo that could be built from the parts they had available. Some of them were hands, as close as Knock Out could get them to the original (but with sadly none of the dexterity). Others were clunky multi-tools. The sort a labourer would find useful.

"I was pestered," Ratchet admitted, dismissing Drift's irritatingly sad face from his mind.

"Well I can craft one for you in a few days," Knock Out murmured, swiping through the various blueprints on display.

"I don't need you to build me a custom job. I'm not worried about how it looks. I just need a hand to work. Any hand will do."

Knock Out tapped a light-pen against his chin, looking concerned. "I have a reputation to keep up," he began diplomatically.

"And it wasn't harmed when Starscream'd vetoed half your work?"

"Starscream is a victim of his caste; gaudy and old fashioned. Just look at his taste in mechs? He's beyond my help," Knock Out folded his arms. "You, on the other servo-

"If you mention Drift-" Ratchet began darkly.

Knock Out hummed dreamily, looking off into the distance, "Deadlock would have done very well on Velocitron."

"Aren't you engaged to Breakdown?" Ratchet reminded him.

"Engaged to be engaged." Knock Out corrected him. "And there's nothing wrong with window shopping, I'm just not allowed to go on any test drives."

"Why does every conversation I have with a Decepticon veer into relationship territory?" Ratchet demanded. "Don't any of you have anything better to talk about?"

"No, as a matter of fact, we don't." Knock Out gave up and closed down the blueprints. He began wandering over to the spare-parts box. "What do Autobots talk about in their spare time?"

Ratchet found couldn't answer that. "I don't have a lot of time to waste away chatting."

"Why's that?" Knock Out came back with a large crate, setting it down with a heavy thunk on the end of the examination berth. "You're not their only medic."

"That better not be another crate full of duct tape," Ratchet eyed the box, ignoring the question he didn't want to think up an answer to. "I thought I'd gotten rid of it all-

"It's not duct tape," Knock Out tipped it over and out spilled a mix of parts; armour plating, bolts, cogs, struts. Knock Out plucked up a fully intact *hand* out of the mess.

Ratchet recognised it. "Is that-?"

"*Barricade's Left*," Knock Out read off the label. "It's two sizes too big, with fingers too thick for more than half the work you'd need it for, but it's the only spare we have." He tossed it towards Ratchet with an expression of disgust. "Wear it for now. I'll build you something more functional."

"It'll do-

"I'll *build you something more functional*." Knock Out said firmly, scooping all the parts back into the box. "I'm not letting you sneak back off to the Autobots looking like Frankenstein's monster."

"Who's monster?" Ratchet mumbled.

"You need to watch more Earth television," Knock Out lifted the box back up. "It's good."

"Not that game show slag Skywarp watches..." Ratchet grumbled under his breath, already gathering tools to help Knock Out attach the hand.

"Especially the game shows," Knock Out protested, "I've learnt so much trivia."

Ratchet flexed his hand, making a fist and then spreading out the fingers. It was stronger, blunter -a hand built for throwing punches- but it could hold things steady and that was all he needed at present. He was marginally less handicapped than he had been.

Starscream hated it.

"I don't want it touching me," He complained, having made it to Ratchet's repair bay at the last hour possible before the week was up. Ratchet wondered if he had delayed until the last minute just to spite him, or if he'd had the intention of skipping it entirely but chickened out at the last second.

It could have been both.

"I'm not going to touch you," Ratchet's denta were clenched together. Two minutes in and he was already losing his patience. "This is a checkup, not a physical."

"That is *Barricade's* hand," Starscream continued, "Don't you know where it's been?"

"It's clean."

"There are things solvent cannot remove," Starscream eyed it darkly.

"How is Megatron coping?" Ratchet asked loudly, hoping to distract Starscream by steering the conversation into criticising-Megatron territory. "Another few days and you'll be cleared for active duty. He must be anxious."

"It's Megatron. His feelings are irrelevant, and isn't this *my* appointment?" Starscream narrowed his optics, quicker to anger than usual. Ratchet normally got in at least three quips before he was snapped at.

It was understandable. Being smothered shortened Ratchet's patience as well. He knew that from Drift.

"You're right," Rather than sinking to the seeker's level, Ratchet summoned diplomacy, "How are *you* feeling?"

"Impatient," Starscream crossed his arms. "And confused as to why my medic seems to suddenly think of himself as a psychiatrist."

"You're in a fine mood today," Ratchet growled, clicking on a light-pen. "Let's get this over with quickly. Any dizzy spells? Light headedness?"

"No."

"Memory blips? Loss of vision?"

"*No*."

"Keeping your fuel down?"

"Now that we're back on half-rations I can't exactly afford not to." Starscream craned his neck to

see Ratchet's data-pad. "How many of these insipid questions are there?"

"A few," Ratchet said noncommittally, looking down at the long, long list. "You've had a lot of work done. We have to go through just about everything."

"Wouldn't it be simpler if I just tell you the problems myself?"

Ratchet sighed heavily. The checklist was designed to flag any issues the patient themselves might not have even noticed, but he didn't have the energy to argue. Besides, Starscream wasn't a particularly ignorant mech when it came to noticing a problem.

"Fine," he relented. "Go ahead."

"Nothing is wrong. I feel fine." Starscream smiled at him sarcastically. "I'll be on my way now. And you can tell Megatron I'm in great shape-"

"Sit down, you little liar," Ratchet jabbed the corner of the data-pad at him. "You're not leaving this room until you can tell me at least one thing that needs improving."

Starscream's snobbish nose wrinkled unhappily. "You Autobots clearly don't know the meaning of 'good enough'."

"One thing." Ratchet stood his ground. "I don't even care if you're making it up."

"Alright," Starscream looked thoughtful, "My fuel pump's running a little slow."

Ratchet scribbled it down. "Good. We'll make some adjustments. Anything else?"

There was a pause. Ratchet looked up from the data-pad, finding Starscream sat with a constipated expression on his face.

"Nothing's insignificant," He pressed. "A small symptom could point to a large problem."

Starscream had to look away from him. "There is ...one other thing. But it's rather private."

Ratchet tapped the light-pen against the screen, wondering how best to squeeze the information from the prideful seeker. "Whatever you tell me is confidential. It won't leave this room."

Starscream glanced around, "Are we alone?"

"Knock Out is off-shift with Breakdown in the Rec, nowhere near close enough to eavesdrop."

"...I'm experiencing a malfunction," Starscream began stiffly, "with internal lubrication."

Of *course* it was going to be interface related. Ratchet was beginning to wonder if he should change his specialist field.

He planted his hands on his hips, impatient. "I thought I told you to take it easy? No fighting. No flight manoeuvres. And *no* 'facing-"

"I *have* been 'taking it easy'," Starscream hissed through gritted teeth. "Look at me! Hardly a dent to be seen. Megatron's been touching me like I'm made of glass."

Ratchet forced the images from his mind, shaking his helm and blinking tightly. "Valvular dryness is a common problem," he managed to retain some form of professionalism. "It's not unusual after experiencing such a stress. That, and your repairs."

"You've misunderstand," Starscream's cheeks looked a little pink. "Dryness isn't the problem. Quite the opposite actually. When I..." he looked away, cheeks graduating from a dull pink to a flaming red as he focused intently on a stack of data-files off to the side. "When I *finish* the lubrication ducts malfunction. They ...release. Copiously. I'm sure you don't need me to elaborate."

Ratchet's light-pen had frozen above the screen. He cleared his vocaliser, "...Well to be frank, that sounds like the opposite of a problem."

"Megatron certainly seems to think so," Starscream muttered darkly, words dripping with resentment.

"I'm not surprised," Ratchet rolled the light-pen between his fingers, feeling awkward. "A lot of mechs find that sort of thing a turn on."

"Yes, well *I'm* not a buymech with a party trick. It's undignified. And worse than that," Starscream paused for dramatic effect, "it's given Megatron a false sense of achievement."

Ratchet held up an apologetic hand (Barricade's hand), "I'm sorry, Starscream, but I can't stop it happening unless I shut down the lubrication system completely and then you'll have the opposite issue. The good news is that this is the sort of minor glitch that can come and go with time. And your frame is still adjusting to the repairs. The glitch may have simply come from a line of unwanted coding accidentally activating along with various your self-repair protocols."

"So that's what's causing it? The shoddy repairs?"

Ratchet's mood darkened, "Shoddy?"

Starscream was remarkably quick to realise he might have offended him, "Knock Out's doing," he amended apologetically, "I'm sure."

Ratchet decided to let it slide. "Any sudden considerable change to your coding can activate little glitches like this." He continued, "They're usually harmless. Why? Anything else the matter?"

"Nothing worth mentioning."

"Starscream."

"Don't use *that* tone on me," Starscream pointed at him, "I'm sure you'd love a few good excuses to fuss and worry over me just a little longer, but you're going to have to face facts; you're just too a good medic. I've never felt better."

Ratchet frowned at the data-pad he was holding, taping the light-pen on the screen, "Maybe I should do a physical, just to be sur-"

"You can poke and prod at me as much as you like when I have that spark scanner up and running," Starscream hopped down off the berth, "but until then you're just going to have to find another way to occupy your time."

Ratchet could already sense a feeling of uselessness closing in on him. Starscream was doing well. Everyone's injuries had been patched up. There had been no stupid accidents or infighting because Megatron was in such a precarious emotional state no one wanted to attract his attention.

"So I'll see you next week?" Starscream was already at the door.

Ratchet's grip tightened on the data-pad. "Alright," he cleared his vocaliser, "but remember what I

said. Don't go over doing it now."

Starscream's optics softened a fraction, and then he was gone. And Ratchet was alone in an empty, sterile repair-bay, with absolutely nothing to do.

Drift found him a few hours later, poking his helm around the doorway to peer into the dimmed room. "Ratch'?" He called softly.

Ratchet straightened up and arranged the data-files in front of him to make it look like he had been doing something. He cleared his vocaliser twice before speaking, thankful that it was so dark. "In here."

There was a pause. "...Can I come in?"

"Why the Pit wouldn't you?" Ratchet snapped, turning his back on the doorway. "I'm not stopping you."

With a heavy exhale Drift wandered in, keeping his distance. "Been looking for you."

"Can't have been looking for long. Where else would I be?"

"In bed? Recharging? It's two in the morning."

"I always work late," Ratchet dismissed.

Drift was now close enough to see the blank data-files. "You're not working now."

Ratchet's optics pricked. He switched the data-pads off and shoved them aside, pinching the bridge of his nose to disguise the blur to his vision. "No, I guess I'm not."

He felt Drift close the distance between them, but didn't turn around to face him. He clasped his mismatched hands together and focused on them instead. He tensed when Drift's armour brushed his back, shuttering his optics against a tide of longing.

"What do you want?" He asked huskily, forcing himself to just sound grumpy, and not so dreadfully overwrought. "You going to drag me off to recharge like I'm some rebellious young-"

Arms came around his neck from behind. If it had been any other mech on this base, Ratchet's first assumption would have been that they were going to strangle him. But not Drift. After a tense pause, Ratchet gave in, allowing himself to lean back against Drift's front, the knot of tightness in his chest loosening and relaxing with the warm squeeze of strong arms across his shoulders. Drift's cheek brushed his audial.

"...You don't hug often, do you?" Ratchet guessed, voice strained and hoarse with emotion.

Drift squeezed a little tighter, arms sliding lower and chin dropping to Ratchet's shoulder, "Don't get all that much of a chance to practice."

Ratchet brought his hands up to cover Drift's. Drift jumped slightly at his touch, glancing down in surprise. "Whose hand is *that*?!"

"Barricade's, allegedly," Ratchet flexed his fingers. "Best we could do."

"They'd do a better job on the Ark," Drift commented.

Ratchet's hand tightened around Drift's fingers. "You keep talking like that and someone's going to overhear you one day. You wanna be shot for treason?"

"You should give your friends more credit," Drift continued, undeterred, his voice warm and rhythmic in Ratchet's audial. "Aren't Autobots always preaching about second chances? About giving someone the benefit of doubt?"

"I *am* giving them credit," Ratchet gently shrugged Drift off his back, "That's why I'm not going to insult their intelligence by thinking I can just stroll back home like none of this ever happened and wave off their concerns with vague promises about how I was only trying to do what's *right*."

"Weren't you?" Drift sat on the desk besides him, distracting hips almost level with Ratchet's optics. Ratchet did his best to ignore the un-Autobot like temptations filling his head.

"Not by them."

"You're a hypocrite then."

Ratchet's head snapped up. "I'm a what?" He demanded crossly.

Drift smirked down at him, "A hypocrite. You were pestering Megatron for days about swallowing his pride and just talking to Optimus, and here you are ignoring any possibility of trying to reason with your own side. Why don't you take your own advice?"

"Because he won't believe me!"

"You don't know that until you try."

"How I am meant to talk to him in the first place?" Ratchet threw down his hands, shaking the table. "Commandeer the comm console in the Control Centre? Ask Soundwave for the security pass-codes? I'm sure he'd just jump at the chance to allow a prisoner unsupervised communication with an enemy faction!"

"You don't need a comm," Drift picked up one of the blank data-pads and offered it to him. "Write to him. That's what they do on this planet."

Ratchet look the data-pad unenthusiastically, "And how will I even get this note to him? Do you Decepticons have a mail service now?"

"No," Drift slid off the desk, "but I hear Skywarp does door-to-door delivery."

Skywarp was persuaded into playing the messenger much easier than Ratchet had anticipated. Though the threat of increased security measures loomed, the mention of a taking peak at the Prime's private quarters piqued his curiosity too much for him to deny such a rare opportunity.

Ratchet reluctantly transferred him a more detailed outline of the Ark's deck-five floor plan, just to make doubly sure there was no repeat of last time. He had no idea how Skywarp had defied the odds and survived an encounter with all three of Autobot High Command last time, but he doubted they would be too surprised a second time not to attack if they spotted a seeker sneaking through

the halls. And the absolute last thing Ratchet needed was Skywarp accidentally warping into Prowl's quarters.

Ratchet wasn't sure what would be worse. If the Autobot Second in Command captured his favourite seeker? Or if Prowl was the one to read the private note?

"Make sure it's Optimus's room," Ratchet insisted, keeping hold of the data-pad when Skywarp reached to take it.

"Yeah, I *get* it," Skywarp tugged it out of his hand. "It's Prime's room. Can't be hard to miss. Must have a throne and stuff in there."

Ratchet frowned, "Why would he have a throne in his quarters? There's barely enough room for a berth."

Skywarp matched his confusion, "Where does he keep it then?"

"Keep what?"

"His throne."

Ratchet searched Skywarp's expression for any signs of teasing. There was none. "He doesn't have a throne."

"He doesn't even have a throne?!" Skywarp's optics widened in shock. "How's he calling himself a Prime if he doesn't have a throne?"

Ratchet didn't really want to get into this sort of discussion with Skywarp. He took him by the shoulders and began to steering him towards the door. "Something to do with being Primus's chosen vessel-"

"Chosen by who?" Skywarp argued pedantically. "Sunstorm says he's a false prophet."

"That's rich, coming from him," Ratchet snapped, feeling a sudden spike of nervousness on Optimus's behalf. "And how many times do I have to tell you *not* to listen to Sunstorm!"

"At least once more, I guess," Skywarp shrugged, winked, saluted, and teleported away with a violent flash of light that seared Ratchet's unprepared optics.

Fortunately, Ratchet didn't have to spend the rest of that hour fretting over how well Skywarp was faring in his task as Long Haul had arrived in the repair-bay that morning towing along the promised spark scanner. It was a stationary, heavy duty machine, covered in hastily welded lead panels to protect it's internal workings from Sunstorm-related damages.

Ratchet gave it a once over and found no outstanding cause for safety concerns. Long Haul was surprisingly trusting, and allowed himself to be used as the first test subject. To test it's range Ratchet did it with the Constructicon stood in the doorway. The scan loaded onto the display scene within moments, as detailed as if it had been scanned by a medical-grade piece of equipment.

Hopefully it would work on Sunstorm.

While he waited for the seekers in question to arrive, he rearranged the repair bay, shifting tables and berths aside to make room enough for everyone to occupy the space comfortably, with little to no exposure to unwanted radiation.

Starscream was known for being notoriously late to appointments, but he was close to on time for once. And it wasn't hard to figure out why. Ratchet could hear the two of them bickering long before the doors opened to admit them.

"-a medical evaluation, not a Conjunx Ritus planning committee!" Starscream argued, striding through the door quickly.

"Then when do you propose we discuss this, brother?" Sunstorm followed soon after at a safe distance, but probably only because Starscream had been walking so fast. "Because despite my best efforts you have been avoiding me since making this promise to Primus-"

"I made the promise to *you*," Starscream said firmly. "And I have been avoiding you because there is a fusion-cannon welding *maniac* stalking the halls looking for you-"

"Peace, brother. Fusion cannot harm me," Sunstorm smiled placatingly.

"Oh God," Ratchet murmured despairingly, "How do you *know* that?"

He was ignored.

"I saddens me greatly to even contemplate this, but you do not appear to be taking this seriously," Sunstorm was shaking his head at Starscream like a disappointed grandmother. "Are you even interested in conjunxing Lord Megatron?"

Starscream's face was hard and cold. "What do you *think*?" he said snidely, lip curling hatefully.

"As I suspected," Sunstorm sighed, "No matter. It was an inappropriate match anyway. I'm sure we can find another suitor, one with much better coding. Though it may be a challenge finding a seeker willing to overlook your deficiencies."

Starscream looked at Ratchet, pleading with his optics for assistance. Or perhaps permission. Permission to respond with violence.

"I don't think the identity of the conjunx is the problem here, Sunshine," Ratchet interjected kindly. "Starscream's just having trouble coming to terms with the potential lifestyle change."

Sunstorm looked contemplative. He turned back to Starscream. "Promiscuity is so unbecoming at your age, Starscream."

Starscream picked up a scalpel from the nearby equipment table. Ratchet crossed the room to prise it from his fingers.

"Probably best we do this quickly." He said, hoping to move things along before someone was stabbed. Or melted. "Who wants to go first?"

Sunstorm cleared his vocaliser, "I have my doubts about the appropriateness of this procedure."

Starscream muttered something under his breath about how much *less* appropriate things were going to get if Sunstorm backed out of his end of the deal now. Ratchet quickly talked over him, "It's just a scan. Like taking a picture of your spark."

"My spark is my most intimate part," Sunstorm objected, laying a hand over his chest. "The holiest piece of myself. It is not something to be shared so freely. My brother may see no shame in such immoral exhibitionism as he lacks the self-control to keep many of his panels sealed for any limited time-"

Starscream tried to wrest the scalpel back. Ratchet held it out of reach.

"-but my spark is unpolluted," Sunstorm continued, oblivious, "purified by Primus's loving hands-"

Seeing as Sunstorm was standing in about the right place, Ratchet flicked the switch on the scanner. The screen began to load up. "There. Done."

"-and bestowed with- sorry?" Sunstorm stopped himself with a blink.

"The scan's done," Ratchet couldn't even muster the energy to feel guilty. He respected a mech's right to religious objections in regards to their own frame, but taking up a moral stance against spark scans? He didn't have that level of patience.

Sunstorm glowed a little brighter, clearly indignant. "You-!"

"Primus will forgive you," Starscream called, shooing him back with waving hands to take his place in front of the scanner next. "Quickly medic, before I get a headache."

Lucky. Ratchet *already* had a headache. He took the scan of Starscream next, and as soon as the screen began to load with their scans, the seeker twirled around and headed for the door.

"Send me a copies to study!" He called over his shoulder, already in the hallway.

Unfortunately, if his hasty escape had been how he intended to lose Sunstorm, it had not worked. The golden seeker scrambled after his potential brother, "Study?! You shall do no such thing-!"

Ratchet sighed. He supposed that could have gone worse. There was no drastic radiation damage done to the repair-bay at least.

The scans filled the screen, set next to one another, pixels still loading. Ratchet had only just started to observe Sunstorm's, taking note of the slight blurring and colour distortion caused by the radiation effecting the scanner even at such a distance- when the room lit up with a flash.

"Evaded capture, I see," Ratchet straightened and turned to smile at Skywarp.

Skywarp smiled back breathlessly, chest heaving and vents roaring with exertion. "I wasn't seen by anyone this time!

"There a reason you're so out of breath?" Ratchet dared to ask.

"I tripped a few alarms." Skywarp shrugged, "tried out Prime's berth. It's not as soft as I thought it'd be."

Ratchet didn't want him to elaborate. "Where did you leave the data-pad?"

"On the pillow. Can't miss it."

"On the pillow of a slept-in berth?" Ratchet cringed in embarrassment. He dreaded what Optimus would think when he found his quarters in whatever state Skywarp had left it.

Skywarp ignored the brewing reprimand, noticing the long-range spark scanner, "Whatcha doing with that thing? Gonna kill someone with it?"

"It's not as impressive as it looks. It's just spark scanner. You missed all the fun of me trying to convince Sunstorm it's not a blasphemous machine designed to send my patients to the Pit," He gestured back to the scans on the screen.

Skywarp's glanced at them, disinterested. Until something about it caught his optics and they widened to a comedic size. He pointed violently, stabbing his finger at one of the scans like it was on trial for murder.

His voice was two octaves too high when he shrieked, "Sunstorm's *sparked*?!"

"What-?!" Ratchet tripped over his own pedes in his haste to turn around, flailing arm whacking Skywarp on the wing. His optics searched the scans, and his spark sank with dread.

"...That's not Sunstorm's scan," he sighed.

Misguided Affection

Chapter Notes

Last relatively happy chapter before shit hits the fan :)

"Wait..."

It took Skywarp a moment to figure out his meaning, and in that three-second delay Ratchet should have thought to take action against Skywarp's inevitable reaction. The seeker's sharp intake of breath indicated the lightbulb going off, but Ratchet was still too busy reeling himself to deny the obvious truth as outlandish before he heard the buzz of Skywarp's warp-drive firing up.

"No-!" He shouted, throwing out an arm in the nick of time, catching the seeker's wing with a brush of Barricade's fractionally longer fingers just as the warp-gate opened and flung them through another dimension of time and space to reach the other side of the base in less than the blink of an optic.

Ratchet's pedes touched solid ground microseconds later and he wasted no time before wildly launching himself at Skywarp and knocking them both to the ground. Skywarp struggled with a curse. He might have been bigger and stronger than Ratchet, but the attack had taken him by surprise, "Guess wh- *Ahh!*"

Ratchet didn't think. There wasn't time to think. He just had to stop Skywarp from talking!

He scrambled to throw his hands over Skywarp's mouth, missing and slapping him across the cheek instead. Skywarp optics narrowed, temper spiking, and he roughly kneed Ratchet off him, knocking him into the side of the worn Flight Rec sofa - the sofa currently occupied by Thundercracker, Thrust, Ramjet, Slipstream, Acid Storm, *and* Nova Storm- twice as many seekers as it was designed for.

The six of them stared down at Ratchet with their mouths slightly agape.

"...Skywarp," Thundercracker recovered enough to glare at his breathless trine-mate. "What-?"

"Don't-!" Ratchet wheezed, reaching desperately for Skywarp.

"Starscream's sparked!" Skywarp exclaimed at the top of his voice for the entire Flight Rec to hear.

Though he probably could have whispered it and had the same effect. Every last seeker stuffed into the confined space was already staring their way.

The silence that followed was stifling. Face flushed with frustration, Ratchet stumbled to his feet and smacked Skywarp around the back of the helm as hard as he could. With *Barricade's* hand, seeing as it was stronger. It made a satisfying *clang*. Skywarp flinched, reaching back to rub it, "Ow!"

"...You're kidding," Slipstream was the first to speak, leaning out from behind Ramjet as she couldn't quite see over the top of his helm. Her tone was deadpan and serious and utterly

unenthusiastic. And it was clear she so desperately wanted it not to be true.

"Yes, he is, he's kidding," Ratchet brushed himself down to look more professional. "Just a bad joke, *isn't it*, Skywarp?"

Thundercracker looked less than amused with the idea of trine-mate joking about such a thing, and that more than anything compelled Skywarp into sticking to his guns, ignoring Ratchet's subtle but pleading looks. "No, it's true! I saw the scan."

"You didn't see anything!" Ratchet shouted, "You saw a blurry smudge on a screen and jumped to conclusions!"

"I know what a new-spark looks like, I'm not an idiot!" Skywarp looked at Thundercracker imploringly. "I *saw* it."

Thundercracker's gaze softened, and Ratchet knew then that denying it was a lost cause. Indistinct murmurs filled the room. Ratchet lifted his hands to his face to block it all out, trying to stave off a panic attack. Starscream was sparked, and he didn't yet know. But every other blasted seeker in the faction did! Thanks to Skywarp's fat mouth-!

"We're all gonna get saddled with sparkling-sitting duties," Ramjet bemoaned, slumping down the sofa until he was almost flat on his back, "Bet it'll take after *mommy* too, screaming all cycle-"

"Like anyone's going to entrust you with a sparkling," Slipstream sneered.

"Who's the sire?" Acid Storm asked.

"It's Megatron, dumb aft. Who the Pit else would it be?" Skywarp's armour fluffed at the offence implied. Thundercracker leaned out and cracked his knuckles at him threateningly. Acid Storm took the hint and shrunk back out of sight behind Slipstream.

Thrust didn't take the hint though. He snorted, "Could be anyone though really. Sunstorm says Screamer's pretty free and easy with his pussy-"

"I very much doubt Sunstorm said *that*," Ratchet snapped, losing patience rapidly.

"Not far off," Slipstream agreed solemnly. "He's very vocal about his disapproval, and Starscream likes rubbing his face in it-"

"None of this is relevant!" Ratchet raged, pointing at them all lined up on the too-small sofa, making one last bid to contain this. "Because Starscream is *not* sparked!"

"Liar!" Skywarp yelled right in his audial. "I saw-!"

"Alright!" Ratchet roared, so loud his voice shook all the glass inside the room. Thundercracker even cupped his cockpit canopy to steady it, blinking in shock. "Fine!" Ratchet snarled. "Fine. He is-!"

Skywarp puffed himself up, "See, I told-"

"-You told every one!" Ratchet cut him off angrily. "Before Starscream himself has even the slightest clue, you've gone and told the entire blasted airforce, Skywarp!"

Skywarp blinked. "...He *doesn't know!*?"

"That's not cool, Skywarp," Nova Storm folded her arms and shook her helm.

Thundercracker dropped his head into his hands. "Skywarp, every time -"

"But I didn't-"

"Just shut up, Skywarp," Ratchet snapped. He reigned in his temper and racked his processor for a way to solve this problem. There wasn't really. Unless he learned how to reverse time.

"This never leaves the room," he began darkly, casting an optic over all of them. "You hear me? Starscream hasn't seen that scan, so that last thing I need is for him to find out he's sparked from one of you idiots gossiping about it all over base!"

Silence. Seven pairs of optics blinked up at him innocently. Too innocently.

He needed to add a few threats. He pointed, "If Starscream finds out about this before I tell him, wings *will* be confiscated. And I won't care which one of you did it, you're all to blame-"

Ramjet opened his mouth, "But Skywarp-"

"All of you!" Ratchet thundered, "and don't think I won't do it! I'll take your wings. I'll shut off your thrusters. I will confine you to the Earth better than any grounding orders Megatron might give you. I will make it my personal mission to ensure you *never* fly again. Understood?"

Seven helms nodded vehemently.

"Good," he relaxed a fraction.

Thundercracker raised a nervous hand, "Are you even sure?" He queried softly. "Starscream's tried before and, I thought baffles were ...impregnable?"

Skywarp muffled a snort.

"They are-" Ratchet exhaled loudly, "-when they're not *microwaved* by flaming preachers. We never got around to replacing them. It wasn't urgent, because Starscream's not even supposed to be active on that front yet." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I suppose this is all my fault..."

"Uh, not to get technical," Ramjet interjected, "But it wasn't you who pumped a sparkling up Screamer's-"

Thankfully, a pinch to his wing courtesy of Slipstream shut him up before he finished that vile sentence.

"I need to get on damage control," Ratchet thought it best to get Starscream back quickly to minimise the chances of him finding out. Threats or no, some seekers just couldn't resist a juicy bit of gossip. "Thundercracker, you have the most self restraint. Can you find me Starscream and send him back to the repair bay. And for the sake of everyone's sanity make sure Sunstorm doesn't tag along."

"Shall I get Megatron?" Skywarp offered eagerly.

"Primus no," Ratchet hissed, feeling a sudden spike of fear. "Starscream can be in charge of telling *him*."

There was no dancing around it. The moment Starscream reentered the repair-bay Ratchet locked the doors, ignored all protests, and insisted the seeker sit down before handing over the scan. Starscream stared at it, expression unreadable.

Reactions to this sort of thing varied wildly. Some mecha were happy, others were devastated. Some couldn't even tell how they felt. Things like overwhelming confusion and nervousness often distorted things. It was a lot to process.

Ratchet gave him all the time he needed, sitting down next to him and waiting for him to speak first. He had treated sparked patients before; thousands of them. But it was ...unbearably awkward to be doing this with Starscream. Despite his role as the seeker's medic, it felt invasive of him to sit in on something so private. Something so far from the war.

"...I'm assuming this is mine?" Starscream eventually spoke, flipping the scan to check the back, perhaps hoping for more information. He sounded calmer than Ratchet would have expected.

"Who else's is it gonna be?" He reminded him gruffly.

"What about those baffles you made such a fuss about slapping on me?" Starscream arched an unimpressed brow, "Those fragging things stung for two days and now you're telling they did nothing?"

"Turn's out they don't work very well after they've been melted," Ratchet grimaced sympathetically. "My fault. I was the one that took them- or what was *left* of them- out. Sourcing a new set just slipped my mind."

Starscream didn't condemn him for the mistake, but nor did he make any effort to reassure him that it wasn't his fault. He fingered the edge of the data-pad. "You were the one who talked me out this. You said reproducing in the middle of a war was the worst mistake a parent could make."

"I didn't say that exactly," Ratchet protested.

"You didn't have to," Starscream pursed his lips. "What would you recommend? What do I do with it?"

"I can't advise you on something like this," Ratchet avoided his gaze. "You know that. I can only respect whatever decision you decide to make and support you through it."

"Even if I wanted you to get rid of it?" Starscream enquired innocently.

"Yes." Ratchet said simply.

"Even if I wanted to keep it?" Starscream pressed. "And dragged this innocent life into the height of the war."

"Yes," Ratchet said, more firmly this time. He wasn't supposed to have an opinion, let alone be invested in this, but Starscream had wanted this so badly-

"How long?" Starscream asked.

"Few days," Ratchet shrugged, taking another glance at the scan. "Very early."

He heard Starscream's fingers tighten on the data-pad with a quiet creak. "So it could be reabsorbed."

Ratchet's spark wilted, "Has that happened before?"

Starscream just shrugged, "I've learnt not to get my hopes up. I was told it can happen often with parents of incompatible coding."

It wasn't untrue. Ratchet wasn't going to sugarcoat anything for him. "Will you tell Megatron?"

"Not yet. I've learnt not to get his hopes up either," Starscream cleared his vocaliser and lifted his helm, mouth lifting into a smirk. "He's been completely intolerable lately. I don't know what to do with him. His protective instinct protocols are already glitching all over the place. He keeps trying to pick up *Ravage*, for slugs sake. This might just tip him over the edge, and if after all this I lost it anyway..."

Ratchet gripped his shoulder, squeezing comfortingly, "You've more than just a team of untrained engineers to watch out for you now and we're going to do everything we can for it. We'll monitor your mineral intake, your fuel quality, your recharge cycles-"

Starscream veered away, "That sounds like a threat-"

"Sure does. That's what being sparked entails," Ratchet told him cheerfully, telling himself he wasn't teasing, not really. It was best that Starscream knew what he was in for. He delighted in the horror morphing Starscream's expression.

"There's nothing magical about it," He continued. "It's an ugly, exhausting, invasive process. You're gonna be poked and prodded and scanned every day of this gestation. If anything does look wrong, it'll be caught early."

"Speaking of scans," Starscream handed the data-pad back to Ratchet, deciding to move the conversation on before he heard worse and changed his mind about putting himself through this. "What did Sunstorm's scan say? Is he...?" He paused melodramatically, emotionally bracing himself. "*Is* he my brother?"

Ratchet decided to let the sparkling thing rest for a moment (Starscream needed a few hours - maybe days- to come to terms with it) and leaned in to bring up Sunstorm's spark scan on the data-pad. He layered it over the top of Starscream's, where the two scans merged to become one near identical spark. Same size, shape, light flares, and colour variations (save for the little blemish on Starscream's that was the new-spark).

Ratchet showed Starscream, "Not brother." He confirmed. "Twin. Split-spark twins."

Starscream made a noise of absolute disgust, thrusting the data-pad away to hold it at arms length. "You must be *joking*. As *if* I could have a twin -as *if* my genetic coding could be identical to *Sunstorm's*! He hasn't had an original thought in his entire existence! What a sick prank to play on a sparked mech-"

"Oh, don't get your panels in a twist, it's not that bad," Ratchet wrestled the data-pad out of Starscream's hand. "You see these shadows?" He gestured to the darkening on the left side of Starscream's spark and the right side of Sunstorm's. "This would be where you separated-"

"I'm not interested in that nonsense. Why aren't I radioactive?!" Starscream demanded in jealous frustration.

"All of us are at least a little radioactive," Ratchet reminded him. "It's produced naturally within our sparks. Sunstorm's just takes things to the extreme. But it looks as if environmental factors meant your spark mutated in a different way. It's created a powerful magnetic field that repels all it

comes into contact with, whether it be physical, radioactive-"

He side-eyed the seeker, "-emotional..." He murmured under his breath.

"Repels everything'," Starscream snorted, "Except Megatron, apparently."

Ratchet thought about merging for a moment. He hadn't considered it before, that two of the vilest, most selfish, egocentric mechs he had ever met would take part in the ultimate expression of trust and love. His processor stalled for a moment.

Because of course they had. Obviously. They'd made a new-spark.

Ratchet blinked rapidly, forcing himself back on track, "It's possible you have some control over it. Subconsciously. Emotionally." He started to feel weirded out again as he continued. "If it can stop a point-blank blaster bolt but it doesn't harm Megatron to merge with you, you must do."

"Sunstorm doesn't seem to have *any* control over his mutation," Starscream reminded him.

"He does. It's his emotions he doesn't have any control over," Ratchet sighed.

Starscream's brow creased, "Will this effect the sparkling? Is this mutation why I can't-?"

"No," Ratchet stopped him before he that idea how plant any deeper. "If anything, you've the most well protected new-spark in the history of spark-bearing. Well done."

Starscream didn't smile at the news. He ran a finger down the seam in the centre of his chest plates, between his turbines. "Megatron will not call a ceasefire for our sake. You realise that, don't you?"

"He cares about you a great deal."

"Which is why the war will stay on course," Starscream said firmly. "He'd never allow his heir to be sparked into a world where it may be seen as lesser."

Ratchet began shaking his head, "That'll never-"

"And neither will I," Starscream slipped off the medberth, cutting Ratchet off with the intensity of his tone. His expression was harder now, serious. "He'll want it over sooner though. You were right when you said this war had gone on long enough. It's time someone ended this."

Fear swarmed Ratchet's spark. He slipped off the berth after Starscream. "Don't," he warned. "Don't start talking like this again. I know you're worried about the sparkling, but-"

"Worried?" Starscream spat, whirling around. "Who do you think you are talking to? Some fretting mechling that stumbled in off the streets?! If we surrender now this'll all have been for nothing-"

"I'm not saying surrender-!"

"They're not going to negotiate with us when they find out about *this*-!" Starscream pointed to his chest. "This isn't a bargaining chip. You really think they'll coo and say '*oh, how sweet! When are you due?*' No! They'll see this for what it is. A weakness. Something to exploit. They'll think Megatron is desperate, panicking-"

"It's not a weakness!" Ratchet snarled, "It humanises you-!"

"*Humanises*?!" Starscream exclaimed. "I shouldn't need humanising! Is that what your stuck-up Autobots still think of us? As less than them? Barbaric?! Undeserving of basic Cybertronian rights-

!"

"You're arguing that accelerating this war is the best option for the future of your sparkling," Ratchet dropped his voice to a furious hiss. "You've not got the moral high ground here."

"I'm not trying to," Starscream scoffed. "If you want this war to end, perhaps you should start thinking about *your* position in all this?"

"My position?" Ratchet leaned away, suspicious, "Starscream, what are you trying to ask me?"

"Having been so close to Prime for so many years, I imagine you sat in on more than your share of briefings-"

Anger shot through Ratchet like a bolt of lightning, "You're asking me to betray them?!"

"Haven't you already?" Starscream argued snidely, "You don't need to act so insulted. We want the same thing. To end this war. But it's not going to happen in some fairytale ending where everyone magically forgives one another and we all live happily ever after. If you really gave a damn about your pathetic Autobot friends you'd tell us what you know so this can be over quickly, without anyone else getting shot in the head."

A volcano-like heat was rising up Ratchet's neck. Only tightly clenched teeth prevented him from roaring at Starscream to get out and flinging whatever was at hand to ensure he did.

"Leave," he hissed, pointing to the door with a shaking finger. "*Now*."

Starscream huffed, "You'll only suffer more this way. You're condemning your friends to hideous ends-"

"Out!"

Starscream stormed off in a huff. Ratchet waited until he was gone before collapsing back into his seat, chest heaving with rage, static roaring in his audials.

To Pit with this. He was getting out here, whether the note he'd sent Optimus was well received or not.

In light of recent events Ratchet wasn't too surprised when he received a summons to the throne room just six hours later. Nervous? Yes. But that wasn't going to stop him from facing the volatile Decepticon Commander. He was tempted for a brief second to notify Drift, but the younger mech would have insisted on coming with him, and he was already so convinced that Megatron was a danger to Ratchet that having him present would turn what could turn be a perfectly peaceful interaction, into something violent.

And if Megatron had violent intentions anyway, the last thing Ratchet wanted to do was bring Drift down with him.

Ravage led him to the throne room, sitting back on his haunches besides the door and gesturing with a silent nod of his helm for him to go in. As far as Ratchet could tell Ravage was relatively indifferent towards him, so it was hard to read what he might be in for. He could sense no

underlying pity for him though, which was a positive.

He entered the throne room with as much purpose as he felt he could get away with. Megatron was sat in his throne at the end of the walkway, regal and alert. His chin lifted at Ratchet's entrance, and he straightened up further, filling his broad throne impressively. Large hands rested comfortably on the armrests. They weren't flexing or clenching, and Megatron's breathign was steady and even.

It was a miracle. He'd finally calmed down.

"This past week I have weighed the benefits and drawbacks of killing you, daily," Megatron began before Ratchet had even finished his approach. His steps fell out of pace at the dismissively threatening comment, but he managed to recover from his stumble with dignity.

"...You've come to a decision?" He asked casually, coming to the base of the throne. He planted his hands on his hips, stood tall and unbullied. Megatron *liked* to menace mechs. Ratchet wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of squirming.

"I have." Megatron stirred with a loud creak of metal. "And you should count yourself fortunate that again the fates have decided to intervene on your behalf. I still have use for your talents. As I'm sure you're aware, my Air Commander is expecting."

Ratchet was shocked for a brief moment. He blinked, "So he told you?"

"He did not." Megatron's optics narrowed. "Skywarp did."

Ratchet clenched his mismatched fists as a wave of heat washed over him. Even in front of Megatron he couldn't stop his furious mutter, "*That incorrigible little-*"

"I have spoken with Starscream and it clear he is apprehensive regarding his condition." Megatron continued hauntingly. "He has convinced himself that this is only a fleeting thing. That the universe will conspire to take this from him as it does all things."

Ratchet squinted at Megatron, struggling to dissect his tone. He was putting a great deal of empathise on *Starscream's* worries, but it was obvious he was far from indifferent regarding the seeker's concerns.

"There's not much I can prescribe for nerves," Ratchet answered honestly. "Starscream's emotional protocols will be unbalanced and entering a precarious state in the next few months. It'll be hard enough for him without involving artificial mood alternations on top."

"I have no interest in medicating my Second," Megatron growled, leaving forward and casting the top half of his face into shadow, till he was just a snarling mouth and two glowing slits of crimson. "But rather, in securing him adequate care. I will not allow anything to lessen the likelihood of this gestation being a complete success. And I know that you, with your misguided affection for him, will do the same."

Tanks still knotted in anger, Ratchet refrained from saying aloud that Starscream was a narcissistic little snot, and his 'misguided affection' had been well and truly obliterated by their earlier disagreement.

"Gestation takes almost a decade," he reminded Megatron instead, thinking of the letter Optimus would by now have read. He swallowed away his guilt. "A lot can happen in ten years-"

"I have no intention of killing you," Megatron waved him off flippantly, "Nor of letting you go."

"The situation may be out of your control," Ratchet said stiffly. "Regardless of why, I may not always be here. And with the war as it is, getting back to Starscream in an emergency would be difficult. The most I can do for him is to train up Knock Out."

Megatron took notice then, pinning him with a calculative look. "You're expecting to be rescued, are you?"

Ratchet said nothing.

Megatron hummed. "You chose him over them before," he mused aloud, "and you know as well as I do that you would never leave a patient in need of your care."

"Starscream's not ill. He's not dying."

"No, he's sparked," Megatron nodded smugly, "and that's worse, isn't it? An innocent life, so vulnerable and defenceless. And with two sets of near-incompatible coding warring against each other it's bound to be a difficult gestation, with more than it's share of complications-"

"Are you wishing that on him?!" Ratchet demanded furiously. "Are you taking joy in the idea of him struggling to carry your sparkling?!"

"I'm being realistic," Megatron said harshly. "Because I have no choice but to. Praying for a safe delivery will not make it so, only a qualified professional will and you know that. Naturally, you'll feel guilty for leaving him. At first, that is. But out of sight, out of mind. Isn't that right, medic?"

"Ten years," Ratchet's throat was tight. "I can't stay here for ten *years*-"

"I think you will," Megatron leaned back in his throne, watching Ratchet through hooded optics. "It won't be so bad. A few more months and you'll begin to feel at home here."

Ratchet didn't wait to be dismissed. He fled the room before the overwhelming guilt sent his spark plummeting into his fuel tanks.

Megatron let him go without protest. But what else would he have to say? The damage had been done.

A Mirage Or Mirage?

"You don't owe him anything."

Drift's quiet call collapsed the vortex of despair Ratchet had been unwittingly spiralling down. He snapped his gaze from Starscream's spark scans and kicked against the desk to spin his stool. In the repair-bay's darkened doorway, Drift offered him a small smile.

Ratchet didn't return it. He looked away. "I know you Cons have some kind of weird hive-mind going on but Soundwave doesn't project memos directly into my head, so you'll have to be more specific."

"I heard about Starscream," Drift ventured deeper into the repair-bay.

It was late, and Ratchet wasn't in the mood to talk, so he had enough reason to shoo Drift off. But he was just about the only Decepticon that sought Ratchet out for actual companionship. Maybe that was why Ratchet was more willing to tolerate his presence than he would any of the other mechs that came to disturb him off shift.

Or maybe it was because Drift was considerate enough to know barging into the repair-bay in the dead of night to thrust himself and his problems (medical or otherwise) directly into Ratchet's face was rude, when no one else did.

"Skywarp told you," Ratchet guessed, clearing his data-pad of Starscream's information before Drift got within snooping distance. He wasn't currently on the best of terms with Starscream, but that didn't give him a free-pass to be a cruddy medic and publicise a patient's embarrassing malfunctions to any Con that wandered in.

That was a job already taken by Skywarp, anyway.

"No actually," Drift surprised him. "I just came from the sparring studio. It was all the Stunticons could talk about. They want to throw a party."

Ratchet's brows bounced off the ceiling, "For *Starscream*? When did he win prom queen? I thought the Stunticons hated him?"

"Oh, they do," Drift nodded. "It's a party to celebrate Megatron. I've never seen such lazy sycophancy."

"Well make sure they don't invite me. I don't want any affiliation with it when Starscream learns he's being snubbed. It's more customary that the carrier should receive the majority of the congratulations and praise anyway; a consolation prize for doing all the 'heavy lifting'."

"I know that-" Drift huffed, plonking himself down on the corner of Ratchet's desk. Ratchet leaned back on his stool to better see him, the metal seat creaking insulting under his weight.

Drift didn't seem to notice, continuing, "-But I don't think all of the Stunticons have quite figured out where sparklings actually come from. They're confusing Soundwave as *a* carrier and Starscream *carrying*. Drag Strip thinks he's got a fully grown cassette hidden in his cockpit."

Ratchet groaned, "I don't know how I even still have the capacity for surprise. I'm not doing anymore of those lectures. If they've got sieves instead of brain modules, that's their problem now. I have to concentrate on ...angry, murderous, pregnant seekers."

"There's more than one, now?" Drift was free enough of responsibility to tease him.

"Starscream is like dealing ten seekers all in one. I shouldn't be surprised he's a twin," Ratchet stared off into the distance resentfully, thinking of Sideswipe and Sunstreaker, and Rumble and Frenzy. "I've never known a decent spark that spilt..."

Drift's smirk lifted higher at the corner. Ratchet caught a glimpse of his gleaming white fangs and began to feel a little gooey in the middle- when Drift's face sudden twisted unhappily.

He turned sharply, frame rising out of a casual slump. "You smell that?"

Ratchet had been smelling *Drift*, drinking in the scent of his armour -hot steel and an oily musk from whatever he'd been doing down in the sparing studio.

He straightened up and cleared his vocaliser. "Smell what?" He asked, nonchalant.

Drift pushed off the desk, his angular, sharp features tilted towards the ceiling to better test the air. "Smells like ...polish. Expensive polish."

"Starscream was stinking the place up yesterday."

"It's not Starscream," Drift dismissed with the sort of surety only a mech who had been intimately close to the seeker in question could have. Ratchet scowled.

Drift was already on the other side of the room though, inspecting the ceiling vents above them. Ratchet followed hesitantly, wondering if some horrid, somehow pleasantly-fragranced sea monster was about to drop out at them. "Starscream doesn't smell like vintage energon-wine and classic praxian diamond-wax."

"How would you know what praxian wax smells like?" Ratchet muttered suspiciously.

Drift didn't answer. Not because he was avoiding the question, but because the bulkhead in the corner of the room chose that moment to flicker like a patch of their reality was actually a cleverly disguised holo-screen.

Drift moved with lightning-like reflexes. A wrench was flying across the room before Ratchet's stalled brain module had even caught up.

Mirage appeared. *Mirage*. Tall and lean and ducking the airborne projectile with unrivalled speed. He dropped, rolled, twisted and fired at Drift from the floor. Drift wasted precious ducking-time elbowing Ratchet out of the way before taking his own evasive manoeuvres, and the blaster bolt clipped him in the shoulder with an explosion of smoke.

"No!" Ratchet threw himself back into the fray, hands raised desperately, "Stop! *Stop!* He's my friend!-" He called to Mirage and whirled on Drift, telling *both* of them, "-*He's* my friend!"

"Ratchet," Mirage's hauntingly eloquent accent drifted out from beneath the examination berth he was using for cover. "It will be easier for me to shoot your captive if you were to move."

"No one's shooting anyone!" Ratchet cried, harried at how quickly things could become violent. He could just glimpse Mirage's brighter armour peaking out among the dark surroundings. He could also hear the hum of his *charged* blaster.

"Put that away and stop shooting," he ordered, gesturing angrily in Mirage's vague direction but not daring to leave Drift uncovered. "What's wrong with you?! You want every Decepticon in the base

coming down here to investigate?"

"Every Con will if we allow that one the opportunity to raise the alarm," came Mirage's argument.

Ratchet felt Drift tense. He held him back, hand across the younger mech's powerful, lean chest. "Stop," he implored to him, softly. "He's my *friend*-"

"He was your friend." Drift bit out, glaring daggers at Mirage's hiding place. "If he still were he would have announced himself to you hours ago, not lurked hidden in the corner. Watching you. How can we know what his orders are?"

"How dare you," Mirage finally reappeared behind the examination berth, hauntingly indignant over Drift's less-than-complimentary insinuation as to his intentions. "I am no assassin-"

"Well you're hardly a decent *spy*," Drift argued back. "What good is invisibility if you bathe in cheap perfume?"

"Cheap," Mirage repeated in quiet horror.

"The letter?" Ratchet called to him, because they had better things to do than bicker, and likely not much time for them. "Did Optimus read it?"

Mirage's gaze darted between them. His fingers flexed around the grip of his blaster. "It would be better to discuss this in private."

"I'm not going anywhere," Drift growled.

"I wasn't suggesting you leave," Mirage sneered. "My weapon is perfectly capable of stunning you."

There was a scrape and ring of sharpened metal as Drift drew a blade. Ratchet caught his wrist. "I know this Decepticon," he reassured Mirage. "I trust him."

"With our secrets?" Mirage frowned.

"With my life," Ratchet could feel Drift looking at him. He ignored the heat his gaze was burning into the back of his head. "Mirage, please. The letter?"

"We all read it," Mirage admitted. Ratchet felt raw and exposed at the thought of his private words being shared so openly, but he understood why Optimus would have done it. "Your methods are questionable, but your charitable efforts are to be applauded." Mirage hesitated a moment then, looking uncomfortable. "Prime requested that if I were to find an opportunity to pass along a message, that I tell you how proud he is of you."

Ratchet couldn't swallow. His intake appeared to be malfunctioning. He nodded stiffly. "Hmm," was all he managed, blinking a bothersome itch from his optics.

"But you're not as well-guarded as we were expecting," Mirage offered him an optimistic smile. "I was sent merely to gather information, but if this unfortunate mech here is indeed your friend-"

"*Unfortunate*?" Drift echoed quietly.

"-then we can leave now," Mirage suggested. "Quietly and peacefully. There's no need to risk any lives, on either side."

Ratchet looked at Mirage's offered hand, and was reminded starkly of Sideswipe's. It had been

tempting, before, just to reach out to Sideswipe and let himself be dragged off to safety, to leave everything he had witnessed and felt and learned behind and fall neatly back into place as Autobot Chief Medical Officer.

It was more than just tempting now. The idea that he could return home. See Optimus, hug Wheeljack, take Drift with him and leave the problems behind.

A sickening, nauseous guilt swooped through him, roiling his tanks. He pressed his lips together. "Circumstances have changed. I- I can't leave."

"I see." Mirage's hand closed into a fist and dropped away, "Your letter indicated-"

"That was before."

"Before?"

Ratchet glanced at the data-pads stacked up behind him, filled with Starscream's data.

"Starscream," he explained simply. "He's-"

"Carrying," Mirage nodded. "Forgive me for eavesdropping. It's merely my job."

"You see why I can't just ...leave. I need to take care of it."

Mirage tilted his helm. "I can understand your concern for the welfare of this new-spark. This is hardly any life worth living, but Prime would not approve of you interfering in a mech's carriage, even a Decepticons-"

"Inter-? I'm not going to *interfere*," Ratchet snapped hotly, plating crawling at the very idea- "What sort of medic do you think I am? That isn't- it's not remotely-! What the *Pit* kind of nonsense was going on in those Towers?"

"Nothing like what you're thinking," Mirage stuck his nose in the air. "Extinguishings weren't necessary. Because unlike the wretched inhabitants of the *Dead End*, my people never suffered from a surplus of population."

"And now no one ever will again," Drift responded gracefully, rising above the obvious jab at his origins. "Less than ten-percent of the population has survived the war. So far."

"Now you listen-" Ratchet raised his voice to draw Mirage's attention, "I'm not harming that new-spark, or it's aft-head carrier, and I won't stand for anyone trying to either. I couldn't live with myself if I left now, knowing damn well my absence splits that new-sparks chances in less than half. The medics here- most are barely medics. There's no chance they could get a protoform to term. Not if there's even the tiniest complication."

Mirage looked apathetically contemplative, "I see your dilemma."

"Oh, do you really?" Ratchet rolled his optics. "Look I'm- I'm not staying here. Never mind that that bullheaded idiot Megatron thinks he can guilt me into it. But I do need a little longer, just long enough to train some of these mechs up. Coach them through what to do. What to look out for."

Mirage was stroking his chin.

"I will report this back to High Command," he decided eventually, and side-eyed Drift. "If I am allowed to leave?"

"He won't stop you," Ratchet nudged Drift away from the door. "But Mirage? This gestation has the Decepticons all worked up, and not in a good way. They're-they're being unreasonable."

"When are they not."

"Just, tell Optimus not to let on that he knows. About Starscream. Him knowing might push Megatron towards doing something drastic," Ratchet scratched his helm, adding awkwardly, "I think old buckethead's got those archaic protocols -where the protective instincts override common sense? Never been upgraded to phase out the bugs. You know ...the ones that used to make expectant sires attack their own reflections?"

"That does sound fraught," Mirage responded with a short nod. "I will be back," he promised. "We're not abandoning you, Ratchet."

"I know," Ratchet felt something lodge in his throat again. "Thank you."

"Next time wear less polish," Drift advised, earning himself one last glare before Mirage disappeared in a staticky ripple.

Drift waited twenty-seconds before speaking, just to be sure they were alone. "...You're friends with *him*?"

"He's alright," Ratchet shrugged.

"He's a snob," Drift informed him, and he wasn't entirely wrong in his observation. "He hates the lower caste."

"You hate the higher caste," Ratchet pointed out.

"That's different and you know it."

"So Sunstorm found out that Starscream's carrying," Breakdown told Ratchet the next morning as they set up for the mech in question's physical examination.

It was more than the routine wipe down. Not only were things to be pristine to minimise any cross contamination (Starscream's frame actively seeking out a diverse range of coding in a variety in inventive ways), but they were having to move the equipment around to make space. Not for Starscream specifically -he wasn't gestating a Titan- but for the audience Ratchet had invited along to study the appointment.

The Deception repair-bay was about to become Earth's first ever pop-up Cybertronian medical academy.

"I'm not surprised," Ratchet responded, feeling only the tiniest smidgen of sympathy for Starscream. "Skywarp's made sure very Decepticon alive knows."

"They were fighting outside the mess this morning," Breakdown continued, "first time ever that I didn't have to line up for my ration- everyone was stood with their audials pressed against the door." Breakdown chuckled. "Dunno why. I could hear them just fine from the other side of the room."

"Was it bad?"

"Ooh, yeah," Breakdown nodded gleefully. "Sunstorm said Starscream was a disgrace to their shared coding."

"And?"

"And then Starscream said Sunstorm was the disgrace to their species."

"And then?"

"...And then Sunstorm asked Starscream if he even knew who the sire was." Breakdown stopped smiling then. "So Starscream said that he couldn't wait for Megatron to figure out how to kill Sunstorm so he didn't have to deal with him anymore."

Ratchet sighed, "How'd he take that?"

"I don't know actually because they just starting yelling over the top of each other until Soundwave broke them up." Breakdown pushed an equipment table up against the bulkhead. "I think he made Screamer cry."

"Soundwave?!" Ratchet found that unlikely. Starscream would sooner claw out his own optics and let them leak coolant in front of the Third in Command.

"No, *Sunstorm* made him cry. I think. He shut himself in the storage room to 'organise it' for half an hour, but when he came out Barricade said it didn't look any different."

Ratchet stuffed the rising niggle of sympathy for Starscream back down, deep down, as far as it could go. He wasn't falling back into that trap.

"...He's sparked." He reminded Breakdown. "That happens, sometimes."

"Yeah, but Screamer?"

"He's as vulnerable and Cybertronian as you and I," Ratchet muttered. "And Sunstorm's a pain in a the aft. He makes *me* feel like crying, but I don't have the excuse of being sparked to actually do it."

Breakdown made an unsure noise. Ratchet looked over at him, "Don't worry about them," he reassured. "They're fine, they're just establishing a pecking order. That's what siblings do. They're just a few thousand years late getting around to it."

"So, do I have to be here for this?" Breakdown asked gingerly. "I'm not a medic-"

"You're a medical assistant."

"Not a real one."

Ratchet levelled a hard look at him, "Last I checked you weren't made out of chocolate, Breakdown. I think you qualify as 'real'."

"But I'm not *trained*."

"Neither is Hook, but that doesn't stop him sticking fingers under everyone's armour, does it? Besides, that's what this is for. I'm going to train you."

"I don't like Screamer," Breakdown answered honestly. "Maybe someone else can be trained. Someone he won't bully constantly. Or someone that won't mind being bullied. Like Skywarp?"

"You think I'd be able to recharge at night knowing Skywarp is Knock Out's volunteer assistant?" Ratchet planted his hands on his hips. "Better yet, do you think *you're* going to recharge at night thinking about Knock Out in here, surrounded by handsome seekers all day and night?"

Breakdown thought for a moment, and eventually came to the conclusion that this job could be a good thing actually, "You're right. I'm the best mech for the job "

"I thought you'd come to see things my way."

"Just so long as I don't have to see anything gross," Breakdown grumbled.

Ratchet kept his lips tightly sealed. There was no chance he was going to forewarn any of the Decepticon's honorary medics on all the 'fun' that was to come.

Starscream arrived for his physical around midday, two hours late, with a water smudged faceplate he was hastily scrubbing at as he came through the door.

News of his earlier argument with Sunstorm and with the implication that he was feeling rather more delicate than his usual tenacious self today implored Ratchet enough that he decided to set their own disagreements aside to try and be nice. For now.

"What are you all doing in here?" Starscream demanded, nasally voice twice as thick and chin close to chest to hide his compromised stare from the audience of medics and wannabes.

"Motormaster hasn't fallen victim to yet another root vegetable, has he?"

Knock Out, Breakdown, and the entire Constructicon gestalt, couldn't seem to resist smirking at the poor seeker. Ratchet glowered at them all, stepping out in front. "No, they're here to study."

"Study what?"

Ratchet gave him a Look. Someone coughed.

Starscream physically flinched, "***Me***?!"

"Now, now Commander," Knock Out separated from the crowd to saunter over, date-pad tucked under his arm. He sounded far too pleased to be part of this. "There's no need to fuss. This is all strictly professional-"

"I am not some *specimen* for you to inspect!" Starscream spat. "Get out, all of you! Megatron will be hearing of this latest exercise in time-wasting!"

"Megatron is welcome to come down," Ratchet said calmly. "Encouraged, even. We're going to be getting our first look at your gestation tank and he may be interested in seeing the progress so far."

"That is *vulgar*," Starscream was scandalised at the suggestion. "I am not *inviting* Megatron to come and *scrutinise* my internals-"

"Won't be nothing he ain't seen before, Screamer," Bonecrusher laughed.

"Bonecrusher, out," Ratchet flicked his finger between the big mech and the door.

Bonecrusher's dopey amusement evaporated, "But I only-"

"You were all warned. Any wisecracks and you're out."

Bonecrusher slumped and trudged from the room.

Starscream didn't bother to watch him leave, "Why do they need to study me? Surely a cadaver provides all the insight they need? It won't take me a moment to source one-"

"They've never seen what a gestation looks like," Ratchet explained quickly, choosing to ignore the disturbing cadaver mention. "Even Knock Out's only read data-files on the condition."

Starscream shifted his footing, looking like a mech who was considering fleeing. "That doesn't explain why I have to be the subject."

"Do you know any other sparked mechs we can look at instead?"

Starscream scowled. "Excuse me for valuing my privacy over their thirst for knowledge."

"They're going to be involved in this, whether you want them to know anything or not," Ratchet reminded them. "You're not an organic. You can't just wander into the woods and do this on your own. And your reluctance to involve them isn't going to change the fact that you're carrying a new-spark of mixed coding, on an alien planet, low on resources, in the middle of the a war."

Starscream's face was very unhappy, "No one touches me."

"No one *wants* to, Sweetspark," Knock Out called.

"A wisecrack!" Starscream pointed damningly. "Are you not going to evict him?"

"He's the only other medic," Ratchet sighed, casting a Knock Out a weary look. "I can't exclude him. But that doesn't mean I won't *remember this*."

Knock Out looked down at his note-taking data-pad to avoid his gaze.

Starscream looked aside, deeply unhappily.

"Don't think of them as your idiot subordinates," Ratchet advised. "Think of them instead as your idiot medics."

An almost-smile quirked Starscream's lips.

Starscream lay reclined on the examination berth, glaring up at the ceiling, his teeth grinding audibly. Standing over him, Ratchet nudged his chin lightly in warning. "Stress," he reminded him.

"I'm. Not. *Stressed*," Starscream grit out.

Starscream was stressed. Even without the teeth grinding Ratchet could tell. Mostly because Starscream was laid out for inspection with the entirety of his chassis plating retracted in a part-

way transformation and Ratchet could see the pressure of his gaskets.

The seeker had been opened up like they were performing vivisection on him, exposing his fuelling system, transformation cog, and most importantly, his gestation systems. It was standard practice, and despite the harrowing sight it made was the least invasive way to perform a physical. Because rather ironically carrying frame's didn't much like things being poked into them.

For the sake of Starscream's limited patience, Ratchet got to work.

"Gestation tank," he pointed to the pexi-glass sphere in the bottom centre of the seeker's abdomen, beneath the fuel tank. "It's conveniently translucent and designed to expand," he gestured to the overlapping plates, "this is what you'd expect to see in the kindling stages of carrying."

"Where's the sparkling?" Breakdown leaned towards Knock Out to whisper behind a hand.

Starscream snorted.

"It hasn't been built yet," Ratchet ignored Starscream and gestured to the sparkling blue liquid filling just over a quarter of Starscream's tank. "Over the coming weeks the frame will flood the gestation tank with building nanites- if you got this cocktail under a microscope you'd see there are already thousands in there. It takes years to build the protoform, and a lot of raw materials. So the carrier has to ingest a huge increase in metals and minerals."

Long Haul scratched his helm with the end of his light-pen before sticking it in the air, "How's the new-spark get from his chest all the way down into the tank?"

"This," Ratchet gestured to the spot on the top of Starscream's gestation tank where a spooled cable sat. One end was attached to the gestation tank itself, through the translucent panels they could see the access filter. The other end was a plug, unattached.

"The cable unwinds and plugs into the base of the spark chamber when the new-spark finally separates from it's creator. It can take a few days for it to drift down though, so the transformation cog freezes while it's active to prevent accidentally disturbing the process."

Starscream pushed himself up onto his elbows, apparently curious enough now to pay attention himself. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," Ratchet felt it best to be honest. "In your case? Probably."

Starscream flopped down again, "Fragging typical."

"I'm sure you all know that sparklings come out the same way they got in," Ratchet continued.

There were nods and general noises of agreement. Scavenger ducked his helm awkwardly and avoided his gaze though, but Ratchet wasn't going to waste time going over all that again. He made a mental note to turf that responsibility off on Scrapper.

"At the base of the gestation tank is the seal," he continued, pointing at a hard-to-see spot at the very bottom of the tank. The seal itself was a small silicone circle, but rubber rings around it showed how it was capable of stretching. "It's programmed to release only during an emergence, which is why spikes need to have tapered tips to be capable of breaching it. You need to make sure that seal stays tight, especially as the protoform develops and grows heavier."

"They know how seals work," Starscream grumbled on the berth, shifting impatiently, "Get on with it."

Ratchet cast an optic over a few surprised faces that definitely had not known how a seal functioned, but said nothing.

"During gestation the protoform rolls itself into a ball as it develops to maximise the space available inside the tank. When emergence begins they'll need to unfold to become more streamlined and make it easier for the carrier to deliver."

The Constructions were looking pale and sympathetic. "...It's a small seal." Scrapper commented.

"It stretches," Ratchet reminded him.

"Gonna stretch enough for Megatron Junior?"

Starscream's optics darted to Ratchet, fading from crimson to a fearful amber.

"If it doesn't the gestation tank is breakable," Ratchet explained. "If the protoform becomes stuck, you open Starscream up like this, break the gestation tank and just lift sparkling out. But then that's it. You can't piece the tank back together again. So unless you can find a new one; no more sparklings. It's a last resort."

Starscream rose onto his forearms, squinting at him, "Yes, but you'll be here to make sure it doesn't come to that."

Ratchet didn't know how to answer, "I'll be here. For a while."

"When the sparkling comes," Starscream rephrased, somewhat fiercer, optics needle-sharp and scrutinising. "When I *need* you."

"I'm-" Ratchet began shaking his head, defeated, "I might be, but that's going to be *ten years* away. A lot can happen in ten years."

Starscream sat up suddenly, all his armour snapping back into place and locking with angry pneumatic hisses. "Megatron *told me* you agreed to oversee this. That you made a *promise*-"

"I promised no such thing!" Ratchet snapped, "Just because Megatron says something doesn't mean it's true."

"You're abandoning me!?"

"I'm not abandoning you, I'm right here!" Ratchet gestured to himself vehemently, "and *still* here after weeks! Because I wanted to make sure these idiots knew how to take care of you when I'm gone-"

"There's no reason for you to leave in the first place!" Starscream howled, shrill and distraught - and Primus, those carrying protocols already had his fierce little optics filling with coolant. "You belong here! With us! *We* value you! *We* need you!"

"*They* need me!" Ratchet argued, flinging an arm in the general direction of where he imagined the Ark may be.

"They don't need you! They just want you so we can't have you!"

"No they don't," Ratchet scoffed, "That's deranged-"

"If I lose this, it'll be *your* fault," Starscream snarled callously, jabbing a thumb at his chest. He knew all the buttons to push. "I'll blame *you*-"

"You can't blame me-!"

"I can and I will!" Starscream screeched, rolling off the berth with exaggerated dramatics. "You're as bad as Sunstorm-"

That was going too far. Ratchet felt his temper flare up and eclipse his desperate sadness.

"*Sunstorm*?!" He roared.

"Yes, him!" Starscream was at the door by now, sending the drama-enraptured Constructicon's scattering like his emotionally fraught condition was somehow catching, "I know you'd both rather it just hurry up and extinguish so you can get on with your pathetic little lives!"

He ran from the room like an overemotional teenager that had just lost an argument with it's parents, leaving behind a thick, weighty silence. Ratchet felt sick and angry, Starscream's accusations bouncing around his head.

"You can go," he told the Constructicons distantly, nodding at Knock Out and Breakdown too.

They began to file out, quietly. Breakdown lingered a moment, fiddling with some of the data-pads and making it look like he was trying to neaten the stack.

"What is it?" He asked wearily when he realised the Stunticon wasn't going to leave on his own accord.

"S'okay Ratchet," Breakdown reassured him softly, "like you said earlier; he's sparked. He probably didn't mean any of it."

Ratchet somehow doubted that. He managed a weak smile anyway. "I'll take that into account."

Breakdown saluted him on his way out, leaving Ratchet to his thoughts.

Ratchet thought about it long and hard.

Starscream was sparked. From a medical perspective Ratchet already knew the seeker's emotional protocols were misfiring all over the place. He was also dealing with a newfound twin brother, who just happened to be both certifiably insane *and* devote Troublemaker in the name of Primus. He was also losing a war of four-million-years, being sustained on pitiful rations when his frame was doubtlessly urging him to gorge, and living in a dark, dreary, dripping, sunken warship, with his free-flight hours severely restricted due to his condition.

It was a fairly miserable existence.

And Ratchet couldn't forget to take into account that Starscream was also in a longterm serious relationship with Megatron, so that couldn't be easy either.

All in all, Ratchet was prepared to cut him a little extra slack. So the past few days that taught him that he and Starscream could never be friends. But they *could* stil be amicable. And he wasn't going to let a few hormonal outbursts tear down what had taken weeks to build between them.

Besides, it was natural to be nervous in the first few months of gestation. Starscream was going

through something he'd never experienced before. And with lifetimes as long as theirs, it wasn't a feeling they encountered often.

And yes, he was self-aware enough to know he was making excuses for him.

He had no doubt that in time Starscream would settle, that he would come to terms with his carriage and accept that things weren't going to fall apart simply because Ratchet wasn't there. And then Ratchet could slip away without causing a level-five Starscream-meltdown.

But until that time came he was willing to stay. He had to make sure Knock Out knew what he was doing anyway. And there was no rush. He was at much lower risk of danger now that Megatron's murderous intentions had been abated, and Optimus knew where his loyalties lay and why he was delaying his return. Whether he approved or not was irrelevant.

Ratchet couldn't sleep with the image of an anxious Starscream fretting over the future lingering in the back of his mind though, which is what found him wandering the deserted halls of the underwater base in the middle of the night, looking for him.

Since Starscream was prone to working late, Ratchet had checked the labs first, the official one was empty, the second showed evidence of his recent presence.

Ratchet took a moment to snoop before moving on, glancing over Starscream's half-finished blueprints for his ungrateful brother's radiation-proof improvements, and shaking his helm at the half-drunk fuel-ration left cooling and abandoned on the desk.

"I'm going to have to put him on a fuelling schedule like sparkling," Ratchet muttered to himself.

He moved on, poking his head into the flight rec and shaking it at all the seekers choosing to huddle haphazardly together on the sofa in lieu of retreating to berths. The command centre was deserted save for the dazed night-guards watching the monitors. Ratchet checked the flight logs whilst he was there too, just in case, but everyone was home and safe for the night.

Which meant Starscream had probably already retired for the night, and Ratchet had no choice but to swallow his pride, risk Megatron's inevitable ire, and pay the command quarters a visit.

Instead of pressing the dreaded access button on the door panel, Ratchet wisely rapped his knuckles against the steel frame.

There was silence inside. Ratchet glanced at his chrono. He supposed it was late enough for recharge-

The doors suddenly opened and a large, towering silver Megatron was looming over him. He was shiny and clean, looking like he'd recently showered, and he wasn't wearing his fusion-cannon. It made a remarkable difference to how big he felt. He was still large, but it wasn't overwhelming. Ratchet didn't even feel the need to step back from him.

"You." Megatron's expression soured.

"Me," Ratchet agreed. "He asleep?"

"If he is, he's not doing it here," Megatron's gaze darkened. "But how fortunate that you came to see me, saving me the trouble of summoning you myself."

"Don't you have better things to do than sitting around summoning people for intimidation sessions?"

"No," Megatron admitted. "Don't *you* have better things to do with your time than deliberately antagonising *sparked* mechs?"

"I do actually," Ratchet rubbed the back of his neck. "That's why I came by. You know where he is?"

Megatron was silent. At first, Ratchet thought he was going to refuse to give him a location, when the larger mech finally sighed. "He insisted on working late in the lab. Some new project of his. I imagine he's still here, falling asleep over his blueprints."

Ratchet nodded, and seeing no reason to draw out the conversation, Megatron stepped back inside his quarters and closed the doors.

Ratchet took a step, and hesitated. He had *just* checked the labs and Starscream most definitely wasn't there- his blueprints left unfinished beside a half-drunk ration.

There was very little logical reasoning behind a hungry carrier skipping meals.

An awful, heavy feeling settled in his tank. He turned back, hand reaching for Megatron's door access panel, when an invisible force wrapped around his wrist and stopped him.

His spark lurched, "Mira-?"

A sudden jolt of electricity shot through him before the second syllable passed his lips -a stun bolt locking him into an involuntarily stasis. His optics went blank and his audial switched to static. Sensors blinked off one by one, but slowly enough that he felt hands -more than just one set- catching him to save him from a strutless fall.

He smelt Mirage's fancy polish. But it was overpowered by grass and soil and earthiness and *Hound*.

He was unconscious before he recognised it as a rescue, but it took less than a micro-second for him to realise he wasn't the only mech they were taking.

Three Arguments And One Suckerpunch

It wasn't dissimilar to waking up after a bad dream.

Systems rebooted slowly, groggy from the stun bolt he'd taken. He knew he was back aboard the Ark. The air was clearer, fresher- it smelt of oil and earth, the burnt rubber of tires from reckless Lamborghinis racing through the ships generous hallways. He was home, but he hadn't woken up from a nightmare. He was still in it.

He onlined his optics to a wall of orange. He'd forgotten how bright the colour was. It stung his optical feed and he shuttered them again with a hiss, aching arms shifting him up the chair he appeared to be slumped in.

When he onlined them again, Wheeljack was standing over him, his arms folded tightly over his chest, tense, standoffish.

Ratchet met his gaze, "...Jackie?"

Wheeljack exhaled raggedly and dragged Ratchet out of his chair into one of the tightest hugs he could ever remembered getting.

"Primus, Ratchet. Primus, I missed you-"

Ratchet returned the hug after a hesitant pause, folding his arms around Wheeljack and tightening them as feelings of longing rushed back to him. Wheeljack smelled of smoke, and bad engineering decisions, and the musty work room they would share for every late night project. He had missed that scent so much. Missed Wheeljack so much. He hadn't even realised...

He swallowed tightly, pushing his face into Wheeljack's strong shoulder.

"Hey, It's okay," Wheeljack's words were warm and sure, "You're okay, Ratch'. We got you."

It hit Ratchet like a sledgehammer then, a sudden chill of dread like he had been dunked into the Arctic sea. He shoved himself out of Wheeljack's arms, taking him by the shoulders. "Where is he?"

The blue of Wheeljack's optics faded with regret. "He's, uh ...he's still stunned."

It confirmed Ratchet's worst fears. He let his arms drop from Wheeljack and moved away. The smell of home was suddenly making him feel sick.

"Not Starscream," he corrected, voice shaking with growing anger. "I can guess where he is, but I'll get to that later. Where is *Prowl*?"

"Maybe you should calm down first," Wheeljack took his own step back. But there wasn't much space to back up into. They were in a tiny disused office not far from the mess, Ratchet recognised it now. It often doubled as an interrogation room. The door lock had been adapted for the purpose.

"This is the calmest I am going to be," Ratchet warned. "The longer you leave it, the more likely I am to *kill him-!*"

"I'll comm Optimus," Wheeljack lifted his wrist.

Ratchet caught it. "Not Optimus. *Prowl*. Now. And Jazz. *And* Mirage. Because I want to know

what happened. I want to know how the *Pit* this slag happened, and I want to know before *fragging Prowl* has had the chance to cover his *scheming, manipulative backside of any wrongdoing!*"

"Ratchet, they had to!" Wheeljack protested desperately. "We had to get you out of there."

"No they didn't! There wasn't a single good damn reason for them to -to abduct us! I was going to come back!"

"The longer you were with them the more likely-"

"Did Optimus approve this?" Ratchet snapped, not wanting to hear Wheeljack make excuses for anyone's stupidity.

"He..." Wheeljack rubbed the back of his helm. "I don't think he knew until it had already happened."

"I thought so," Ratchet snarled darkly. "This has Prowl written all over it."

"He had to make a difficult decision."

"Difficult? What about this was difficult for him?! The decisions *I* made were difficult," Ratchet pointed at himself angrily. "Does he think I wanted to stay away? That I was taking an extended vacation?!"

"Mirage passed on your message to Optimus," Wheeljack took a brave step closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. "He knows what you're like, Ratchet. He knew they would try to use this to manipulate you-"

"Use *what*?"

"...Starscream, and his-" Wheeljack made a vague gesture at the armour over his lower chassis, where his gestation tank would be. "You know."

"They weren't trying to manipulate me," Ratchet snorted impatiently. "He got sparked. It was an accident."

"Accident or no, why would the Decepticon Second in Command -no, why would *Starscream* willingly keep an unplanned new-spark if he didn't have ulterior motives?"

"Ulterior motives? Are you hearing yourself?" Ratchet cried incredulously. "He's keeping it because he wants a sparkling, Wheeljack!"

"For what? What's Starscream going to do with a sparkling? What are *any* of them going to do with a sparkling besides use it to keep you under their thumb a little while longer? Think Ratchet!

There's enough of a strain on their resources as it is without adding something like a sparkling into the mix."

"I-" Ratchet seethed. "How they would plan to fuel it is irrelevant. And it wouldn't have mattered if I *had* stayed the whole ten fragging years of the gestation! I'm not a Con! I'm an Autobot. You know where my loyalties lie. I told you-"

"Which is why we did everything to get you back." Wheeljack stood his ground stubbornly. "It's why Prowl did what he did."

"Prowl didn't do this for me!"

"It's why we're willing to put up with Starscream for a decade- if it means we get you home, where you belong."

"What about getting Starscream home? You can't just-just rip a carrying mech away from their trine, from their family!"

"It's Starscream." Wheeljack squinted at him like he feared for his psychological health. "He doesn't have a family."

"Doesn't he?!" Ratchet exclaimed.

"Ratchet you've got to calm down, you're not making any sense."

"*I'm* not making sense?!"

It was then that the door-panel flashed green and the locking mechanism's shifted inside the door with a loud clunk. Ratchet swung around to stare as it swept cleanly open for Optimus's tall frame to step through. The crease lines of the derma beneath his optics revealed how he was smiling under the mask. Unsurprisingly, his good cheer irked Ratchet even further.

"Ratchet," Optimus breathed, optics mellow and comforting. Clearly the room was soundproof, as he didn't seem to realise the danger he was in. "Old friend, you're-"

"-Furious!" Ratchet bellowed across him. "And I don't have time for an emotionally constipated reunion with you right now! What the Pit have you *done*?!"

His shout caused Optimus to take one big stumbling step backwards over the threshold, into the relative security of the corridor- which, now that Optimus's bulk wasn't blocking the door, Ratchet could see was filled with gathered Autobots eager to welcome him back. Hearing his shout and appropriately gauging his current mood, most of them knocked into each other with a loud chorus of clangs, clatters, and frantic hisses for each other to move as they fled.

Optimus, of course, didn't have the luxury of fleeing.

He mustered his famous courage and stepped back in, a much more appropriate sense of sombreness overtaking previous relief. "Wheeljack, could you give us the room?"

Wheeljack probably didn't need asking. He was already slipping past Optimus and walking at speed out the door to join his cowering comrades, regretting that he had volunteered to be the one present when Ratchet woke up in the first place.

He must have missed him dearly. But Ratchet would have to feel guilty about yelling later.

"What did Mirage tell you?" He began the moment the door shut behind the engineer. He had to keep his breathing even to stop his voice climbing into a shout again. 'Angry' mechs never got very far negotiating with the Prime.

It was why Optimus was so good at dealing with Prowl. *Usually*,

"Mirage explained your situation to us," Optimus said simply, "and how your concern for certain vulnerable Decepticon parties was complicating matters."

"So you decided to *abduct* the vulnerable party to put me at ease?" Ratchet was dumbfounded by the reversal of logic. "*Great thinking.*"

"...I was not consulted on the decision." Optimus admitted, sounding honestly regretful. "Prowl jumped the gun. He claims my involvement would have delayed matters."

"And Jazz?" Ratchet demanded. "Mirage and Hound are his mechs."

"Jazz was not aware of any orders regarding Starscream. He approved only *your* extraction."

"Do you realise how bad this is?" Ratchet hissed, pausing just long enough to realise how hard his fuel pump was beating. Starscream wasn't well liked but he was *liked*, and Ratchet had seen the dysfunctional loyalty certain other Decepticons had for him.

If properly motivated, Sunstorm could peel the roof of the Ark and create a molten Autobot-soup out of them. If properly applied, Skywarp could teleport the muzzle of his blaster through the back of Optimus's head.

He already knew where the Prime's room was.

Ratchet swallowed. "Do you realise what damage Prowl's done? What you've all done?"

"Peace, Ratchet," Optimus attempted to placate him. "Starscream is unharmed."

"That's not going to matter to the nut-job he works for, is it?!" Ratchet thundered, overwrought because Optimus just wasn't *getting it*. "It's not going to matter to his trine! To his broth-" he stopped, recollecting himself.

"They won't care that you use the kiddie gloves for Starscream. He's sparked. And more than that, he was off active duty. On medically assigned rest. Assigned by me! This is only going to provoke them! How could Prowl think this was a good idea?! Did he smack his overinflated head on a doorframe and knock his tac net loose?!"

"Prowl concluded that the benefits of your return outweighed the risks of holding Starscream captive." Optimus folded his arms, assuming a stern stance and voice. "He argued that you would not have returned until this new-spark had emerged, and that you might then feel obliged to remain throughout it's early years. That over time, you would become too entrenched in life there. That you would grow attached. That you would never come back."

Ratchet couldn't believe Prowl had gotten Optimus to swallow any of this crud. "Never come back?! I don't even *like* Starscream!"

"That aside," Optimus continued wearily, "We must also acknowledge that we have to responsibility to all innocent life-"

"Innocent life?" Ratchet repeated, before it sunk in. "No..."

"The conditions in the Decepticon base are unsafe and unsanitary," Optimus began sadly.

"No!" Ratchet snapped before he could go further. "*No*. You don't get to do this. You don't get to criticise the way they have no choice but to live and use it to justify taking a sparked mech prisoner! And you don't get to say it's for their own good like you're not the one in the wrong too! Yes, it *is* a slag-hole down there, but where the Pit else are they going to go, Optimus? They're stuck there. And I know it's their own fault and I *know* they're all a bunch of absolute afts, but you've still abducted Starscream! You don't get to take pride in that! You don't get to say you're doing him a favour!"

His vocaliser was cracking towards the end, strained by the prolonged yelling. Optimus stared

down at him with cool, thoughtful optics.

"Your reasons for staying laid with the survival of this new-spark." He finally spoke again. "Their chances will vastly improve here. Starscream will have the best care."

"No he won't!" Ratchet clutched at his head. "Because he's been taken from his home!"

"Ratchet, I am more than willing to defer to your expertise here," Optimus held up his hands. "The decisions made here today were not done with my blessing. If you wish for us to do so, we will of course release Starscream."

"Good." Ratchet nodded. "I'm going with him "

"That, I cannot allow."

Ratchet started, "He *needs* me,"

"You belong here." Optimus's voice became low and firm, the figurative lowering of the foot.

"You are not Decepticon. You are not non-affiliated. Our friendship means I am willing to overlook the errs in your judgment, but I cannot allow this. I cannot knowingly lend our greatest asset to the enemy cause."

"What happened to making you proud?" Ratchet demanded through gritted denta.

"I am proud." Optimus stated sadly. "Proud to have you as our medic. Proud to call you my friend."

"But you think my judgment is 'skewed'," Ratchet made air quotes with his fingers sarcastically. "You think I'd be wrong to provide care for the most vulnerable life on this planet."

"Starscream is not vulnerable."

"The new-spark is."

"And so again, we arrive at why Prowl had Starscream brought to us in the first place. I'm sorry to say Ratchet, but I am beginning to understand his reasoning."

It was like the longer they stood there speaking, the stupider Optimus was getting. "You can't be *serious?!'*"

Optimus's audials were saved from an impending triad of profanity by a sharp knock at the door. Optimus cleared his vocaliser, "Come in, Ironhide."

The red mech stepped through the doors as they rolled open, casually nodding at Ratchet before addressing Optimus. "Screamer's up," was all he said.

Optimus nodded, "Thank yo-"

"Where is he?" Ratchet interrupted fiercely, before he could leave.

Ironhide's face twisted into one of his infuriatingly put-out expressions. "Nice to see you two, Ratchet. I'm fine thanks, how're you?"

"*Where*, Hide?"

"He's in the brig," Optimus supplied, looking like he thought Ratchet was about to fly across the

interrogation room and start strangling the answer out of Ironhide. His instincts weren't wrong.

"The *brig*?!" Ratchet shot Optimus a hate-filled look. "The brig. You're in fine form today, Optimus.

"He's been made comfortable," Optimus tried.

Ratchet didn't want to hear it. "Comfortable in a fragging cell. Great. When Megatron blows the roof off this place looking for his Second at least we can say we gave his pregnant paramour a few extra pillows!"

Ironhide vocaliser emitted a horrified noise, like an old mech choking on oil. "Megatron's the sire? You gotta be kidding me-"

Optimus quickly waved Ironhide's fears aside, "Now, that assumption is unverified-"

"No, it's not!" Ratchet snapped. "Megatron is currently functioning on haywire siring protocols, half rations, and *no* sleep! Why else do you think I warned Mirage about him! Pit only knows what he's going to do when he realises Starscream is missing. That *I'm* missing. It's not gonna take a genius to figure out where we are!"

"Megatron cannot reach is here." Optimus said confidently.

"He can if he's hitching a ride with Skywarp."

Optimus looked at him sharply. "Steps have been taken to ensure that cannot be repeated. And now that you've mentioned it, Red Alert would like to discuss with you how shockingly well informed Skywarp was regarding the layout of the Ark."

"I don't have time that," Ratchet said quickly, slipping by Optimus and Ironhide. "Which cell?"

"Is it really wise for you to see him in this state?", Optimus called after him. Ratchet could hear his heavy pedefalls following him out into the corridor.

"Ratchet!" Yellow and enthusiastic, Bumblebee appeared in one of the doorways, stepping out to hug him.

"Not now!" Ratchet barked, speed-walking towards the brig.

He heard Ironhide grumble a less than complementary apology on his behalf to the offended mini-con in his wake. Ratchet was going to have to readdress all the feelings he was hurting at a later date.

That's if any of them survived this.

They had stuck Starscream in cell 1A -the first in the brig- so the racket he was making was being carried all through the lower decks. Ironhide probably wouldn't have needed to inform them that Starscream was awake at all if the room Ratchet had been taken to hadn't been soundproofed. It was already abundantly obvious to everyone else aboard the Ark that the seeker was up.

Ratchet had all the codes, so he didn't wait for Ironhide and Optimus to catch up before barging his way in.

The energised security bars tinged the darker, viewport-less space a sickly neon blue. Everyone present looked pale and under-fuelled

But not necessity just because of the stark lighting.

Ratchet did feel some gratitude towards whoever had been on brig duty when they'd brought Starscream in, because true to Optimus's word they had put some thought into making the brig marginally more comfortable for the seeker.

Starscream had pillows (torn and shredded, puffs of white fluff drifting across the floor aimlessly), a heater (broken and sparking, spewing a sad trail of wispy smoke), a tray of energon snacks (thrown at and now dripping down the cell wall) and a collection of data-pads (stamped on, glass screens broken into shards).

Wherein laid the reason for the all the yelling.

Starscream was stood in the centre of his cell, and currently held the longest of the glass shards he had prised from the broken screens of the data-pads to his own throat. His head was tipped back to expose the fuel-line going up into his helm. The main one, actually. The jagged edge of the glass was pressed right up against it.

Ratchet's mouth fell open. For once, he was lost for words. He didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or just leave again.

Hound and Mirage were posed besides the cell door like they had been trying to talk the seeker down when Ratchet had arrived. Mirage couldn't meet Ratchet's gaze.

He didn't have time for him anyway, stumbling past the both of them to stand before the glowing cells bars, staring at Starscream's heaving frame between them.

"...What are you *doing?!'*" He cried when he finally found the spare processing power to shout.

Starscream had the good grace to look a little embarrassed, but the glass remained at his neck when behind Ratchet Ironhide and Optimus finally caught up. Optimus stopped mid-stride and stared.

"Oh," he murmured. "It's going to be one of *those* days..."

"Silence, Autobot scum!" Starscream spat, vocaliser grinding with obvious emotion.

He drew the shard away from his neck to brandish it aggressively at Ratchet, starting forwards like he was going to stab at him through the bars. Ratchet stumbled away in surprise, but beside him Mirage shifted towards the cell door.

Starscream brought the shard back to his own throat quickly, clumsily, cutting himself. A thick bead of pink energon welled up on the glass and began to trickle down it, over Starscream's knuckles. Starscream either didn't notice or didn't care.

"I know this was you-!" He threw at Ratchet, enraged to the point that he was shaking.

Ratchet couldn't tear his optics from the trickle of energon dripping down Starscream's wrist now.

"Starscream," he softened his voice into something placating and patient, "We know you're not going to kill yourself. You love yourself far too much-"

"I don't think that's how you talk someone down off a ledge, Ratch," Hound advised quietly.

"He's not *on* a ledge!" Ratchet snapped, "He just wants someone to go in there to try and 'save him' so he can stab *them*!"

"Suck on your own exhaust pipe, you sanctimonious hack!" Starscream kicked a squashed energon treat at Ratchet. It hit the bars and fizzled out of existence. "I knew this would happen, I *knew* it! Curse that idiot, Skywarp. I knew we couldn't trust you!"

"Starscream, please," Ratchet couldn't keep the emotion out of his voice and it wasn't doing anything to help him sound calm. "You don't have to hurt yourself to try and escape-"

"You can cease your inane prattling medic." Starscream hissed. "The farce is over. I know better than to listen to you."

"I'm trying to *help* you, Starscream!" Ratchet's voice climbed out of acceptable talking-someone-down parameters and into the more familiar shouting-at-an-idiot volume. Which wasn't ideal. "I'm trying to fix this!"

"You're always trying to *fix* things, aren't you?!" Starscream sneered. "So how is it that you only ever make things worse?!"

Beside Ratchet, Ironhide scoffed and lifted his blaster, flickering the dial on it's side to set it to stun. "Step back Ratch', I'll take care of it-"

Ratchet slapped his hand over the muzzle of the blaster, pushing it back and out of sight. "No, he's already been stunned once today-"

"So? It ain't gonna hurt 'im."

"He's sparked, you moron-"

Starscream turned the shard threateningly against his throat. "That blaster points anywhere near me and I sever every fuel line I have-"

"You're not going to do that, Starscream!" Ratchet snarled, but felt a chill crawl down his backstrut anyway.

"What I'm not going to do is let Prime there use my gestation tank to win his war!"

Optimus made an uncomfortable noise. "That wasn't exactly my intention..."

"Neither am I!" Ratchet shouted over his leader's awkward mumbling. "For Primus's sake, Starscream, put that down! We're going to let you go!"

"We are?" Mirage muttered incredulously.

"No," Starscream's shook his head. "You *lied* to me..."

"I have *never* lied to you," Ratchet declared hotly, "So drop that filthy chunk of glass before you give yourself an infection. Don't make me come in there!"

"Like Pit-" Ironhide flung out an arm to stop him when he started towards the cell.

"Get off of me, 'Hide," Ratchet shrugged him away, reaching for the lock mechanism.

A sharp *pew* sounded before he could touch it, blue sparks exploding over Starscream's frame. The seeker convulsed, jagged piece of glass slipping his grasp and splintering into dozens of tiny, pink

stained shards at his feet. Ratchet watched as Starscream's unfocused optics fluttered shut. The seeker swayed on the spot, but Ratchet's shaking hands couldn't disengage the lock to get into the cell in time to break his heavy, strutless fall.

Ratchet stared down at Starscream's splayed frame.

A scowling Prowl stood in the doorway of the brig, offlining his blaster. "Much better."

There was some distance and four mechs -including a poleaxed, horrified Optimus- stood between Ratchet and Prowl's infuriatingly smug face, and Ratchet couldn't remember clearing any of it.

One minute he was at the cell door, the next, his knuckles were making incredibly satisfying impact with Prowl's nose.

Collecting Seekers

It was over as quick as it had begun.

As blinding fury cleared from Ratchet's vision he was already being bodily hauled away, with Ironhide's strong arms around his middle and his pedes skimming the deck floor. He struggled, rage burning through his fuel lines and the knuckles of his borrowed hand itching for another swing.

Optimus had Prowl pinned to the bulkhead with an arm across his upper chest, staring at Ratchet like he didn't recognise him. He searched blindly through his subspace for a polishing rag to dab roughly at Prowl's nose. A stunned Prowl tried and failed to smack him away. "Prime-!"

"Typical! Make sure *Prowl's* okay!" Ratchet raged, twisting an arm free to point at his superiors angrily. "He shot a sparked mech-!"

"Ratch', Ratch', s'okay," Ironhide puffed desperately against his audial. "s'alright. He's just stunned. Just a stun-"

"It doesn't matter that it's just a stun!" Ratchet felt his throat tear on the words. He couldn't see Starscream over Ironhide's shoulder, just the broken glass strewn across the floor. "Are you trying to extinguish the new-spark?!"

"That's enough!" Optimus commanded sharply, and there was a loud thunk as Prowl attempted to surge up but was pinned down again by his commander's arm. Optimus spared him a passing glance, and Ratchet felt a small tinge of satisfaction to see Prowl wince at the judgement he saw in his leader's gaze.

"Hound?" Optimus called, keeping his focus on his second-in-command.

Ratchet noticed then that Mirage and Hound were in the cell with Starscream. Hound was turning him over with gentle hands, moving him onto his side to check the back of his helm where he'd hit it against the ground. "Looks okay," he murmured, bending his head close to listen. "Not in stasis, just shorted out."

"Move him into another cell," Optimus ordered, casting an optic over the glass glittering across the cell floor.

"Be careful with him," Ratchet snapped, pushing against Ironhide's loosened grip. The arms tightened again.

Hound didn't respond, but a resigned Mirage joined him in a crouch beside Starscream and withdrew a pair of stasis cuffs.

Ratchet's anger resurfaced with a vengeance, "Now wait just a minute-!"

"It's a Decepticon," Prowl snapped behind Optimus's arm, his voice distinctly more nasally.

"He's unconscious!" Ratchet argued back.

"Yes, unconscious! Not *dead*!" Prowl interjected again. He looked as furious as Ratchet felt, and with the energon smeared across his face and streaming out of his nose, he looked near demonic too. "He's perfectly capable of waking up and ripping Hound apart-"

"Frag you!" Ratchet spat, sick of hearing them speak about Starscream like he was some kind of feral beast.

"Ratchet, c'mon," an exhausted Ironhide huffed.

"It's merely a precaution," Optimus said carefully, trying not to make it look like he was siding with Prowl. Which he blatantly was.

Hound lifted the now cuffed seeker into his arms, grunting with exertion at his dead-weight. Unsurprisingly, Mirage made no motions to help him, standing aside to let them out of the cell so Hound could take him into the opposite one. Ratchet watched in tense silence as Hound set Starscream down on the fresh berth slab. Mirage shook out one of the blankets from the first cell, glass twinkling, and awkwardly shoved it at Hound, gesturing for him to place it across the seeker.

Despite Prowl's neurotic paranoia, Starscream of course, didn't wake.

Ratchet pushed against his captor again. "Let me check him-"

"A moment, Ratchet," Optimus held up his free hand to stop him. "Starscream can wait."

"At least un-cuff him!"

"After the spectacle I walked in on?" Prowl queried. "So he can rip another holding cell apart for improvised weaponry?"

"Will you shut up!" Ratchet snarled. "If it weren't for you and your vile schemes none of this would have happened in the first place!"

"If it weren't for me, you would still be a prisoner," Prowl lifted his chin.

"So what is this?" Ratchet demanded, "Revenge? They kidnapped me so you decided to give them a taste of their own medicine? A eye for an eye? Is that it? You really wanted to make it *hurt* through, didn't you? You *knew* he was carrying-!"

Prowl finally pushed Optimus's arm away to stand. Optimus remained close by though, optics darting between them in concern.

"Despite your ridiculous insinuations I would never do a thing so petty." Prowl began, unashamedly righteous in his choices. "If Mirage's report was to be believed -and it's accuracy is abundantly clear now- you had grown so attached to the enemy you refused his low-risk extraction plan. Your reasoning? Your concerns over the carriage of a *Decepticon* seeker."

"I said I was going to come back. If you had just waited instead of jumping the gun-"

"Waited for you to return at Megatron's leisure? Or your own, perhaps? Your arrogance is astonishing."

"My arrogance?!""

"Enough of this!" Optimus interrupted, sounding like he was starting to lose his own temper now. "Prowl, Ratchet's criticism is sound. Our actions are bordering on unethical-"

"*Bordering*?! You're so far past the line you can't even see it!" Ratchet snarled. Ironhide tried to cover his mouth with a hand. "Get *off*, 'Hide!"

"Starscream will be released." Optimus gracefully ignored Ratchet's outburst. "But Ratchet, you

will not be going with him."

"Releasing him now isn't going to solve anything," Ratchet protested. "You're going to have to comm Megatron and de-escalate this situation because he-" Ratchet pointed at the unconscious seeker in the cell, "-isn't going to do that for you. We dump him somewhere after this and he's going home to Megatron to tell him now he was *shot* in his cell by the wannabe Terminator over there-"

"The Pit's a terminator?" Ironhide mumbled.

"It's -it's a killer robot, in a film," Ratchet snapped, remembering the ridiculous movie night at the Decepticon base. A wave of sadness washed over him.

His pause gave room for Prowl to start making excuses again.

"I stunned Starscream because he was threatening to hurt himself," he argued hotly.

Ratchet wished now more than ever he had a wrench in hand. Or something equally heavy to throw. "He wasn't actually going to hurt himself, he was just making some garbage attempt to lure someone into the cell with him, Prowl! I was handling it before you came in guns blazing!"

"Well ain't like old Meg's has the grounds to criticise our conduct," Ironhide commented optimistically.

"Hypocrisy has never stopped a Con before," Mirage muttered.

"Megatron never knowingly *kidnapped a carrying mech* so you're reaching a little there, Mirage," Ratchet sneered.

"Megatron *kills* people," Hound reminded Ratchet, as if he'd forgotten.

"And you've never killed anyone ever, have you, Hound?" Ratchet argued sarcastically.

"...No one that didn't deserve it."

"I can't- I'm just-" Ratchet threw his hands up. "You're almost worse. No. You *are*. You're worse than them, because at least *they* know they're shitty-"

"I was unaware that you had joined the ethics committee, Ratchet," Prowl huffed snidely.

"Don't need a whole committee to know you're rotten to the core, Prowl."

Prowl took a step towards him and Optimus again had to hold him back. But this time it was Ratchet he was glaring at.

"It's been a difficult few weeks for you, Ratchet." Optimus said softly, but sternly. "Perhaps a trip to one of the med-bays yourself is in order. First Aid will be pleased to see you-"

Ratchet wasn't going to be distracted or lured away by friends on the verge of a catastrophic war-altering event though. "First Aid can wait. I'm not leaving you here with Starscream."

"Prowl's presence here is not necessary," Optimus began to pacify. "I can arrange-"

"No, not just Prowl. All of you. Any of you. I'm not leaving Starscream's side until he's free-"

"So you can slink back to the Decepticons with him?" Prowl suggested.

Ratchet surged towards him again but Ironhide's grip around him locked. The red mech growled, "You wanna give it a rest, Prowl? We're going 'round in circles and my arms are getting kinda tired. Be a real *shame* if he were to slip my grip."

"Hide," Optimus warned. "No one is picking sides."

"Except you, huh, Optimus?" Ratchet couldn't help himself.

Optimus responded with the silent, intense sort of stare that made Ratchet feel like this wasn't going to go well for him. "If you're seriously considering defection," he began calmly.

"You're not listening!" Ratchet cried, "I'm not defecting! Even if you're all doing your level best to make me want to!"

And with that last damning outburst, the brig door opened to emit Bumblebee. Ratchet cringed and looked away from the mini-bot's stunned expression at the scene in front of him, optics darting between the restrained CMO and Prowl's streaming nose. Optimus cleared his vocaliser loudly.

"Yes, Bumblebee?"

"...So, mind control?" Bumblebee asked tentatively.

Despite his broken face, Prowl snorted loudly. Ratchet fired a hate-filled look in his direction.

Optimus looked grim. "The situation is ...complicated. So unless you have something of note you need to tell us-"

Bumblebee blinked at the reminder. "Uh, oh yeah! Security protocols activated on the upper decks. Someone broke in again."

"Again?!" The last remaining scraps of composure Prowl had gathered together all but evaporated at the news.

"Who?" Optimus straightened up.

"Another seeker teleported in."

"Skywarp," Ratchet whispered in horror, fuel tank plummeting.

His gaze snapped to Starscream's unconscious frame. Skywarp was reckless but he wasn't suicidal. If he had come here it was because he was looking for someone. According to Ratchet's chrono it would still be the early hours in the morning at the Decepticon base. Megatron hadn't shown any inclination to hunt down Starscream the night before, so Ratchet had hoped they'd still have time before anyone noticed the Air Commander's absence.

That said, if they'd wanted to cause a ruckus Skywarp would have come with reinforcements. So long as the stupid seeker didn't escalate things Ratchet might be able to contain this situation yet. Skywarp could teleport back with Starscream and it could be like none of this had ever happened.

Yes. That could work.

Despite news of the Decepticon teleporter loose about their base, Optimus and Bumblebee were still talking. Neither of them seemed motivated to go after their intruder. Ratchet's unease doubled as he zoned back in to their conversation.

"- the improved security measures work?" Optimus enquired calmly.

Bumblebee smiled. "Yeah, got him good. Red Alert's already got the inhibitor on him-"

"The *what*?!" Ratchet shouted, looking between everyone for an explanation. "Inhibitor?! As in those barbaric inhibitor *collars* they used to use on outliers?"

"What do you expect us to do, Ratch," Ironhide shrugged wearily. "The little freak kept warping in n' stealing our stuff. Was Jazz's idea to set up the trap-"

"But an inhibitor collar?!"

"What else is gonna stop him from jus' 'porting outta the brig?"

"So now you have *two* captive seekers!" Ratchet cried to Optimus, incredulous.

"Yes, we appear to be collecting them," Optimus acknowledged wearily.

"We can still fix this," Ratchet tried to impress upon Optimus how serious this situation was about to get. "We give Starscream to Skywarp. It's the quickest way to get rid of them. Because if Megatron comes looking and finds *this*?" He gestured to the general situation as a whole. "Then people are going to die, Optimus. People. Human people, not just you morons."

Optimus stared at him wordlessly, but Ratchet could tell he was at least weighing the options up in his head. At spark, Optimus was a good leader; compassionate, brave, noble- all the traits that inspired such loyalty from all of them. But he wasn't perfect. He had made mistakes too, more mistakes than Ratchet had ever really wanted to acknowledge.

"Please," he implored. "De-escalate this."

"Bumblebee," Optimus turned to the intrigued mini-bot at his side. "Ensure Skywarp is brought down here and placed with Starscream. 'Hide, you'll watch over them. Contact me if Starscream wakes. And Ratchet?" Ratchet bit the inside of his cheek, meeting Optimus's gaze. "Come with me."

He was already turning to leave, giving short clipped orders to Prowl, Mirage, and Hound, as Ironhide gingerly released Ratchet and shook out his doubtlessly aching arms.

Instead of following, Ratchet dodged around Ironhide to look into the cell. Starscream lay covered in the blanket. It almost looked as though he was sleeping.

"Ratchet." Optimus's beckoned him.

"Where are we going?" Ratchet snapped.

"The bridge."

"Is it really wise to invite a Decepticon sympathiser onto the command bridge?" Prowl demanded huffily.

"I am sure Bumblebee and Red Alert will appreciate any help you can offer containing our intruder." Optimus deflected effortlessly. He glanced to Ratchet again. "In the meantime, I shall make contact with Megatron."

Ratchet looked again at Starscream, asking Ironhide, "Don't let anyone bully him while I'm gone."

"*Bully* him?" Ironhide raised both brows at his request.

As if Ratchet wasn't feeling enough like an overbearing motherboard as it was.

They didn't cross paths with Skywarp or his captors on the upper deck, but in the corridor leading up to the main-bridge there was the lingering smell of smoke in the air- burnt metal and plastic like someone had been electrocuted. Ratchet spied a web-like pattern of scorches across the bulkhead.

He stopped. "Was he hurt?"

"Who?"

"Skywarp."

Optimus finally looked back to see what was holding his medic up. At the sight of the burnt metal cladding he cleared his vocaliser. "Bumblebee gave no indication he would require a medic."

"But is he hurt?" Ratchet traced the scorches with his finger. "You don't need this much voltage to stun a mech. It's excessive."

"I'm sure it looks worse than it is."

"But you didn't check yourself," Ratchet muttered. "This looks like it could have killed a cassette."

Optimus said nothing.

After a moment Ratchet heard him turn and continue on towards the bridge. Ratchet hesitated before following him. The urge to ensure Skywarp was still functioning normally had to come second to his growing sense of responsibility. One problem at a time, he told himself. Skywarp would just have to lick his wounds for now, at least until after Ratchet had ensured Megatron and Sunstorm hadn't set their differences aside and joined forces to enact a hideous radioactive apocalypse on the planet.

His supposed the silver lining was that he probably didn't have to worry about Sunstorm burning down the Ark while Starscream was still inside it. But that being said, Sunstorm didn't have a great deal of focused control when it came to the destruction he wrought.

On the bridge Jazz was casually leaning against the side of Teletraan I. He looked up from a datapad and smiled at Ratchet, easy and genuine, like he'd hardly been gone at all.

"Well, well, well, look who it is. It's good to see you, Ratchet."

"The feeling isn't mutual," Ratchet snarled, still too wound up by the actions of his 'friends' summon a reciprocal greeting.

"The situation is worse than we thought," Optimus explained to Jazz, who didn't seem too concerned, offended, *or* surprised by Ratchet's anger. "Starscream is sparked by Megatron."

"Figures," Jazz's shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. "Guess he's gonna want him back then."

"Is that why Prowl took him? As leverage?" Ratchet demanded.

"If I understood the complexities of Prowl's thought processes I wouldn't still be stuck on first-base

with him," Jazz joked. Then leant to the side to see behind Ratchet, just to make sure Prowl wasn't lurking back there and had overheard.

"He's on the lower decks," Optimus put him at ease. "Where I hope he'll have the sense of mind to stop by one of the med-bays."

Jazz shifted in concern, "Why, he glitching again?"

"I punched him," Ratchet admitted.

Jazz's face performed an interesting variety of expressions as he worked hard not to smile. "...Can't say I didn't see that coming."

Optimus sat down at Teletraan and brought up the comm system, entering in the frequency for the Decepticon base and leaning forward intensely as it began to transmit. Ratchet paced tensely just out of visual range, waiting.

But it rang out.

Jazz folded his arms, "No one's home."

"Keep trying," Ratchet said firmly.

Again, Optimus called. Again, no one answered.

Optimus shared a concerned look with Jazz. Jazz pushed off from the side of Teletraan, his goodnatured smile looking a little forced. "Excuse me," he dismissed himself, and walked swiftly out the door.

"Try again," Ratchet pressed, loitering at Optimus's shoulder.

Optimus did. "How much do they know?"

"I didn't tell them anything," Ratchet said shortly.

"I'm not accusing you of anything." Optimus watched Teletraan continue to ring unanswered on the screen in front of them. "But if Megatron is about to launch an attack we need to know how best to defend ourselves. I know you gave the layout of the Ark to Skywarp. I know why you felt you needed to do it."

"Okay, so maybe I shared a little more with them than I should have, but Megatron knowing where the air vents lead to is not your main concern here."

"Then what is my main concern?" Optimus swivelled around in his seat. Teletraan rang out again, emitting a sad, negative tone. "Do they have a weapon? Is that what caused that fire? The radiation damage?"

"It's not a weapon." Ratchet's attention darted between Optimus's worried frown and the 'Frequency Unresponsive' message flashing on Teletraan's screen. "It's Sunstorm."

"Who is Sunstorm?"

"He's a seeker. He's ...attached to Starscream and he, he has this mutation. His spark emits this massive excess of radioactive heat." Ratchet explained quickly. "He can't control it but it's dangerous. *He's* dangerous, and he-"

Ratchet was cut off by the sudden blare of Teletraan's alarms, dozens of them going off at once. Pop-ups flooded the screen, each more urgent than the last; proximity alerts triggering, warnings of nearby fires, of air toxicity, of hull damage, of radiation levels climbing.

Optimus looked from the flashing screen back to Ratchet, his optics wide with dawning realisation.

How Many Times Can A Broken Thing Break

Optimus leapt from his seat at Teletraan I and transformed within a step, tires screeching across the deck as he charged past Ratchet and barrelled through the doors. Ratchet went to follow, when an unearthly golden glow breached the Ark's front view-ports.

Shielding his optics from the light and the heat, Ratchet got as close as he dared, spying the distant bipedal form of Sunstorm hovering in the sky above them, brighter than the dawn sun. Thick plumes of rising smoke soon obscured him as the trees and foliage surrounding Mount St. Hilary caught alight. Within seconds, wisps of smoke began to drift through the Ark's air vents.

Teletraan began reporting of various fires around the ship.

There were a hundred things to panic about, from the impending Decepticon attack to dying hideously in a raging inferno, but one priority made it to the forefront; Starscream and Skywarp locked in the brig with no way to get out.

Ratchet turned on his heel and ran for the doors, making it through just as the sprinkler system activated. He flinched as the deluge hit him, sprinkling across his armour with irritatingly sharp pinging sounds. "Fraggit-!"

He wasn't the only mech getting drenched. Out in the main corridor, Autobots -his friends and colleges- were darting back and forth from the control rooms to the armouries, some covering their heads, other slipping across the wet deck. Red Alert -looking more stressed than Ratchet had probably ever seen him- barged past him to get into the bridge.

Among all the chaos -alarms, sprinklers, panicked shouting- there was no one to stop Ratchet from dodging his way down the busy corridor to reach the stairwell leading to the lower decks.

He was one step down when someone grabbed him by the back of the neck, nearly choking him. Battle protocols already online, he whipped around, swinging Barricade's left. His fist was caught in a strong palm and suddenly he was being crushed against a chest of yellow armour.

No, not crushed.

"Sunstreaker?" He gasped out, leaning far enough out of the embrace enough to see the warrior's face. Sunstreaker was wet and scowling, but it didn't diminish the strength of his hug.

"You're a real jerk, you know that?" The yellow twin growled. And no sooner had he released Ratchet was Sideswipe suddenly hauling him in. Ratchet grunted in surprise at the second, even tighter embrace.

"We're not gonna let them take you back," Sideswipe told him fiercely. "Me and Sunny, we're going to protect you-"

"I don't need your protection, you knuckle-heads," Ratchet hugged him back, briefly, before reaching up to grab at his stupid, confused, frowning face. "They're not here for me. It's Starscream they want."

"They can have him," Sunstreaker growled, kicking angrily at a puddle forming at his feet. "Just as soon as I shoot whoever's responsible for triggering the sprinklers. Look at my finish!"

"I think the ship's on fire, bro," Sideswipe sounded weary but amused.

"This little reunion is going to have to wait," Ratchet regretfully began to retract himself from the twins, because unlike their counterparts in high command, *they* weren't responsible for any of this mess. And he was genuinely happy to see them. "I have to get to the brig."

Sideswipe caught him by the wrist, expression serious again. "No, we've gotta get you somewhere safe-"

"Nowhere on this ship is safe," he broke Sideswipe's grip harshly and began descending the stairs before they could stop him. Unsurprisingly, after a short pause of silent, presumably telepathic bickering, he heard their footsteps following him down.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" Ratchet called up to them, not slowing. "A ship to defend, maybe?"

"And let you have all the fun!?" Sideswipe answered cheerfully, shouting over the noise of their pedes on the metal stairs and water from both the sprinklers and upper decks trickling down with them. "We can shoot at Con's any day of the week-"

Ratchet decided to ignore that comment for now. There were only so many lectures he could give in one day, and he was on a time crunch.

Most Autobots were either outside the ship battling Decepticons or at control stations attempting to keep the Ark's engines from exploding, so there were no interruptions to distract the twins from their self-appointed positions as his bodyguards. They followed him all the way down to the brig.

Water from the upper decks had caused the brig to flood. It was ankle deep and rising still when they arrived. Ratchet paused on the stairs and stared down the long, dark corridor of cells. The lights overhead had been water damaged and were either flickeringly eerily or offline entirely. The distantly wailing alarms had been joined by the low-bass rumble of what sounded like explosions outside. The flood water rippled with every boom.

"Kinda spooky," he felt Sideswipe catch up behind him and lean down. "You scared?"

Ratchet didn't dignify that with a response. He stepped down into the water and began to wade through. Sideswipe followed, jumping in with a noisy splash. Sunstreaker didn't, pausing halfway down the steps.

"I'm not getting in *that*."

"You're already wet."

"It looks *brown*-!"

Ratchet left them to it, splashing and crashing his way down the isle. There was no sign of Hound, Mirage, or Ironhide. But seeing as they were being attacked, they must have decided they had higher priorities than babysitting seekers.

"Starscream!?" Ratchet called over the sounds of running water.

"You again!" Came the answering shout.

Ratchet reached the cell they had moved Starscream into, and felt a tiny speck of relief to see Skywarp was already in there with him. It meant he wasn't going to have to waste more time searching the ship for him.

They were soaked, water dripping off their wings and raining down on them from the seams in the ceiling tiles above. Starscream made a particularly pathetic picture, looking like a drowned rodent with the blanket he had been given wrapped over his shoulders, the wet fabric sodden and clinging to him. They were stood in the middle of their flooded cell, Starscream -still cuffed- was fiddling with the collar around Skywarp's neck, but without the codes to release it, or tools to break it, he had little hope of getting it off.

"Hang on," Ratchet went for the lock.

"No!" Starscream raged, whipping off the blanket and throwing it with a wet slap against the energy bars of the cell. They sparked when the wet material made contact. "Get away from us, traitor!"

"Wow, there's two of them," Sideswipe appeared, trudging through the water, having heard the shouting.

"I see you brought your favourite slack-jawed front-liners to gawk at us." Starscream sneered, looking up and down at Sideswipe. "I realise perfection can often inspire awe and this is the closest you've ever stood to it, but do try not to stare."

Ratchet ignored his immature goading, "Are you alright?"

"I was stunned, *twice*," Starscream held up two fingers in the manner of someone making a rude gesture. "Skywarp here was electrocuted! Primus knows the damage such a brutal attack will have done to his brain module. Like his processing capabilities weren't disadvantaged enough already!"

"Yeah!" Skywarp stood with his hands on his hips, looking very serious.

"*You* broke in *here*," Sideswipe argued.

"Because you stole Starscream, byte-brain!" Skywarp argued back.

"*Stole?! Like we'd want that loud-mouthed clown!*" Sunstreaker's distant voice echoed down to them from the stairs.

A furious, but confused, Skywarp looked up and around for the source of the insult.

"I'm sorry, Starscream," Ratchet cut in before Skywarp could say something that might annoy the most easily provoked Autobot -Sunstreaker- just enough to get him wading through the flood water so he could strangle him through the bars. Which was very possible. "I'm sorry this happened. But I had nothing to do with this. I would never-"

"Yeah, right!" Skywarp snarled. "You were the one who told them he was sparked!"

"I," Ratchet struggled with a rush of guilt. "I did. But I didn't know... I never would have if I'd known something like this-"

"What else was gonna happen?" Skywarp approached the bars, his wings up and forward. Beneath the flickering lights, with his dark paint, he looked ...frightening. "You think Prime was gonna send him a gift basket? Call off the fighting for a couple centuries as a gesture of good will?"

"It was *Megatron* who planned to escalate the war," Ratchet could accept he was at fault here, but he wasn't taking *all* the blame. "And you, Starscream."

"Because he knew something like this was gonna happen!" Skywarp snarled, close enough to the

bars now that he was in danger of getting electrocuted. Again.

"Skywarp," Starscream called him, surprisingly calm. There was a moment of wordless communication between them, until Skywarp finally stepped back.

"I don't trust him."

Starscream ignored his trine-mate. "Are you here to free us or watch us drown?" He asked, gesturing with his cuffed hands to the rising water, now up to his knees.

"They're not gonna drown. We should leave them," Sideswipe muttered.

"It's not drowning I'm worried about," Ratchet muttered, moving to the cell controls to disengage the energy bars completely. It had been getting steadily more humid down in the brig. Ratchet could just about picture the fiery scenes outside the Ark. At least smoke travelled *up*.

The moment the bars disengaged there was a sudden clang and thunderous rush of sound somewhere above them. The steady drip of water became notably heavier. It appeared a pipe had burst somewhere above them. At the stairs, Sunstreaker swore.

"Your pathetic ship is falling apart," Starscream came forward and extended his wrists for the cuffs to be released.

"We're being attacked," Sideswipe snapped, stepping defensively between Ratchet and the seekers. "By *you*."

"Well, not me specifically," a smirk played across Starscream's mouth as he jangled the cuffs. "My knight in shining armour, I assume?"

"Yeah. Golden, radioactive armour," Ratchet corrected.

Starscream's smile slipped away. "Oh."

Ratchet placed a hand on Sideswipe's tense shoulder to move him aside. "We need to get out of here," he said, speaking both to Sideswipe and the distrusting seekers. "The Ark may be a Vanguard-class interceptor but the heat shields haven't worked since the crash and the hull is already fire-damaged-"

"Yeah, I though it was getting hot in here," Skywarp wiped a hand across his forehead.

"Did Prime approve this?" Sideswipe's worried optics darted between him and the seekers when Ratchet tried to shift him aside again. "They're prisoners."

"Seeing as Optimus didn't approve of Starscream's capture in the first place and is presently engaged in 'radioactive warfare', I can't see him raising any objections."

To further test his patience, Skywarp then decided to place himself in front of Starscream. Starscream's optics nearly rolled into the back of his helm.

"Skywarp," Ratchet lifted his hands, "It's me."

Skywarp's optics narrowed further.

"Ugh!" Starscream scoffed loudly, shoving Skywarp aside. "I don't care about trusting him. At this point I'd just be happy if my armour wasn't sizzled off my protoform." His expression darkened. "Because in case you need *reminding*, I know what that feels like."

Skywarp opened his mouth to argue but Ratchet was already disengaging Starscream's cuffs with the standard security code. Starscream rubbed his wrists resentfully when they were free. He didn't thank Ratchet -and that was no surprise- but he didn't fly at him and scratch his optics out either. So their relationship may yet be salvageable.

Skywarp was a little more difficult, backing himself into the corner of the cell and splashing flood water at Ratchet until some of the spray caught Starscream - at which point one deadly glance from his trine-leader had him reluctantly letting Ratchet near enough to enter the release codes into the collar.

"I don't like this," Sideswipe said as the collar fell off Skywarp's neck and disappeared beneath the water. He was holding his blaster to his chest, wary, as Ratchet gave Skywarp a quick once over. "If it were anyone but you, Ratch!-"

"I know, I know, you'd tell me were to stick it." Ratchet's gaze softened. "I owe you one, Sideswipe."

"*I'm still here!*" Sunstreaker called from the stairs.

"I think we can call it even," Sideswipe said softly. "I'm sorry I left you in there."

"That's not what happened."

"I should have fought harder."

"You were concussed!-"

"Do you *mind?!!*" Starscream demanded loudly, clearly feeling he had remained silent for long enough. "Is it really too much to ask that you get us out of this deathtrap of a ship *before* having your debate on which of you deserves to take the most blame?!"

Ratchet had to remind himself that Starscream was sparked, and though that wasn't justification for him being a rude little snot, it was why he shouldn't violently shake some manners into the seeker.

"He's right Ratch, we better get out of here," Sideswipe glanced around at the groaning ship. "They're attacking from the West but we can get you out the portside airlocks!"

"You go," Ratchet urged him. "They need you up there!"

"*You* need us!" Sideswipe began to protest.

"Again!" Starscream interrupted. "Unbelievable. *I* am leaving before I'm boiled alive in sewage water by my estranged relative. Skywarp!" He thrust out a hand, presumably for his trine-mate to take and teleport him to freedom.

But Skywarp hesitated, looking to Ratchet. "Is it safe to teleport him?"

Ratchet met Starscream's gaze. It wasn't. Not in such an early stage of gestation. He kept his expression carefully neutral. "It's going to be safer than trying to get up to the airlocks and flying through that war-zone."

"Then you'll come with us," Skywarp insisted, reaching to grab him.

"You're not taking him again," Sideswipe's fingers twitched around his blaster.

"Who says we're taking him? Maybe he *wants* to come?" Skywarp bared his denta.

"I'll come back," Ratchet promised, steeling himself against Sideswipe's spark-broken expression, his inevitable feelings of betrayal. Again. "As soon as I know they're safe I'll be back. But I have to fix this."

"Fix *what*?!" Sideswipe cried incredulously. "The war?! Ratchet, you're great and all, we all love you, but don't you think this might be a little beyond you? You can't shout Megatron into surrendering."

"Because it won't be *us* doing the surrendering, nerd," Skywarp argued.

"I'm not going to shout at anyone but Optimus," Ratchet defended his hastily thought-up, half-assed plan. "*He's* going to be the one shouting sense at Megatron." He pointed at Starscream.

This was news to Starscream. "Like Hell-!"

"Yes, you are!" Ratchet whirled on him, pointed finger a millimetre from his scrunched up nose. "Do you want me to be around to help you deliver that sparkling or would you rather I expired from stress related spark failure? Because if this mess doesn't get downgraded into at least a ceasefire in the next hour then I am going to have a nervous breakdown and *hug* Sunstorm, killing myself instantly! Do you want that?!"

Starscream was silent for a beat. "...That's a tad overdramatic-"

"I learnt from the best," Ratchet snarled. He turned to Sideswipe, "If Prowl comes looking for me, tell him to check in the torpedo tubes and then shove him in one. I'll be back to launch him myself."

Sideswipe smiled despite himself, but an impatient Starscream was hastening along any attempt at a lengthier goodbye.

"Yes, yes, he'll be back before you know it, ready for the noble task of bailout duty with his bucket and mop," Starscream splashed in the flood water, sounding deeply sarcastic. "Now medic, if you're quite done lying to that poor simpleton..."

"I'm not lying-!" Ratchet turned to glare at the tactless seeker but realised a moment too late that Starscream had already gestured for Skywarp to grab him.

There was no time to shout his reassurances and goodbyes before Skywarp's hand slapped to his chest plate and the all too familiar sensation of teleporting overcame him.

In the blink of an optic they were outside the Ark, in sweltering heat and thick smoke. Ratchet stumbled on uneven ground, realising with a flush of angry disbelief that Skywarp had warped them from the brig to only a few hundred metres away, up the side of St. Hilary. They were clear of the immediate flames and blaster fire he could see going off below them, but every second breeze of wind blew clouds of dark smoke and smouldering embers over them.

"Skywarp!"

"Good view, huh?" the unrepentant seeker slung an arm around Starscream.

"You were supposed to teleport him to safety!" Ratchet shouted, pede slipping on loose ground. Rocks tumbled off the ledge they were standing on and down a sharp precipice, below which the Ark sat imbedded in the side of the volcano, barely visible behind the burning trees.

"We're outside, aren't we!" Skywarp argued.

"We could be shot up here!"

"By who?" Skywarp demanded aggressively.

"By literally anyone that sees us!" Ratchet gestured. "Anyone who looks up!"

"No one's gonna look up if you quit shouting!"

There was an explosion down below that caused the rock beneath their pedes to shudder. Shouts and a fresh plume of grey smoke followed.

Ratchet stopped arguing. Not because he thought Skywarp was right, but because Starscream was being unnaturally quiet, staring down at the chaos below. Tiny flashes of colour were visible moving on the ground between breaks in the smoke - Autobots and Decepticons running in and out of cover. Neither seekers nor aerial bots were in the air. Including Sunstorm.

It was difficult to tell where *he* might have gone, which was vaguely terrifying. The distinct lack of golden light beams meant he wasn't part of the ground assault but it was unlikely he would have left. Not without Starscream. Who he thought was still in the Ark...

A stab of fear struck Ratchet then.

Sunstorm ...within melting distance with the Ark's radiation-sensitive Hyperfuel Intake Accelerators!

"Let's find Megatron," Ratchet said quickly, coming forward to take Starscream's shoulder. His hand was slapped away at last minute by Skywarp. Ratchet was sorely tempted to kick him off the ledge. He looked past the purple menace. "Starscream?"

Starscream blinked himself out of his stupor, frowning. "Megatron?" He repeated. "Why would we do that? I thought I needed sweeping off to safety?"

"Someone needs to tell him to call this off, and he hates me."

"Why call it off?" Starscream rocked back on his heels, surveying the destruction below. There was a distant *choom* of the fusion cannon firing. Another explosion. "Looks like he's just getting started-"

"I think he's made his point!" Ratchet snapped.

"Well I don't-"

"Starscream-!"

"Your 'friends' down there abducted me in the middle of the night! Snuck up on me like cowards and stunned me! Twice!"

"I *know*," Ratchet sympathised. "They were in the wrong, I know. But he needs to call a retreat and get Sunstorm away from the Ark before he blows us all to Hell! There are four full tanks of Hyperfuel on that ship! If it gets hot enough-"

"Oh how convenient!" Starscream cried. "Sunstorm isn't a complete idiot, he's not going to walk right up to engineering and high five the Hyperfuel tanks-"

"Isn't he?!" Ratchet exclaimed. "He's done stupider!"

Starscream pursed his lips. "...Let him blow it up."

Skywarp leaned towards him with a concerned mumble, "...But not while we're in the blast radius, right?"

Ratchet shouldn't have been surprised that Starscream could be capable of such foolish spite. He curled his fists, "You want your enemies dead, that's unsurprising. But you're happy to just let Sunstorm kill himself? He's here for *you*!"

"Well I'm not going to just let this go! They could have ruined everything!" Starscream's hands came to his chest.

"I'm getting kinda bored with this argument, guys," Skywarp cut in, slumped with disinterest and looking down at the scene below with clear longing. "Can I go down there and join in?"

"No!" Ratchet stopped him before Starscream could answer. "No, you're staying with Starscream. You're not leaving his side till he's safe."

"He's not yours to order around," Starscream tugged Skywarp back towards him.

"He's not yours right now either!" Ratchet argued, causing Skywarp to look between them, unsure. "You're off active duty. *And* you're not thinking straight."

"How *dare* you-!"

"Skywarp, if you care about him you'll take him to Megatron before he gets hurt."

Starscream's hand shot off Skywarp's shoulder like it had been burned. He took a panicky step back, "Don't even think about it, Skywarp! I'll have you shot for treason!"

There was another explosion below, something impacting against the Ark. The volcano shuddered and huge chunks of rock and earth tumbled not far from where they stood. Skywarp still looked conflicted. His distrust for Ratchet was at war with his worry for Starscream.

But a moment later, his expression hardened. He looked at Starscream apologetically. "Sorry Screamer."

Betrayed and furious, Starscream backed right up to the edge of the ledge. His heel slipped and Ratchet's spark jumped into his throat as he overbalanced and swayed, "Star-!"

Faster than Ratchet's optics could follow, Skywarp shot forward and grabbed him. "Whoops, that could have been embarrassing," he smiled, swinging Starscream into a hold that was masquerading as a hug. "Maybe he's right."

"No!" Starscream struggled, "He's an Autobot! Don't listen to him-!"

"Blowing up the Ark sounds real fun," Skywarp agreed, easily keeping his grip -Starscream was too tired and overwrought to put up much of a fight- "but not while we're all standing next to it, Screamer."

"Take him back to Megatron," Ratchet told him again, turning to begin his harrowing journey down the side of the volcano back towards the Ark. "I'll deal with Sunstorm."

"Are you insane!?" Starscream screeched. "He'll kill yo-!"

There was a crack and fizzle. Ratchet glanced back at the empty ledge behind him, just to be sure

Skywarp really had teleported. His relief was brief though. There was still Sunstorm to deal with.

There was no gentle mountain trail to follow. Ratchet scratched and dented himself skidding down the steeper slopes. His pedes slipped on loose rock and he came close to tumbling several times. Visibility was poor, but he still found himself having to hunker down and shelter from stray blaster bolts. He had no idea which side was shooting at him.

The fighting was taking place near the massive rear thrusters of the ship. The disorganised, fragmented symphony of blaster fire grew steadily louder as he approached, sounding fierce and desperate.

Ratchet wondered if Starscream had come to his senses and was asking Megatron to stand down, or if it had been a mistake to send him, and that the seeker was only egging his leader further on. Nothing indicated the battle was close to winding down.

His vents were huffing and every breath stung by the time he finished his descent. He had to leap over a burning tree to reach the portside airlocks. The moment the hatch opened, searing black smoke poured out. He stumbled back, coughing, blinded and burnt. "Sunstorm!"

Only the roar of distant flames answered. Even the alarms had fallen silent. It was pitch black inside so he used his headlights, stumbling on uneven decking and broken equipment. He whooped his sirens, knowing the sound would travel further. It echoed back at him eerily, unanswered.

"Sunstorm!" He yelled, loud enough to tear at his vocaliser. He coughed again, bracing a hand against the bulkhead. It was hot to the touch. He followed the corridor along, unable to see more than a metre ahead or recognise where he was, until finally, he felt suddenly warmer. Not from the fire or smoke. Something unnatural.

He followed it, stumbling, every part and sensor aching from the ordeals of the day and exacerbated by the heat. His optics were clouded with smoke. He reached up to wipe them, and saw something glowing. It was emanating from the base of a staircase, from the deck below.

It was far too close to engineering for anyone's liking.

"Sunstorm!" He shouted again, quickening his lumbering pace. "Sunstorm! He's safe! Starscream's safe!"

The stairwell was broken so he had to jump the last half. His knees gave out and he landed on his hands and knees in the shallow, murky water below. Golden light reflected off the rippling surface. His head snapped up, and there, at the end of the long dark, smokey corridor, was Sunstorm, stood with his back to him. Sparks of electromagnetic radiation danced across the surface of his armour, striking and zapping against the walls and ceiling around him.

"Sunstorm?" Ratchet called, softly, fearfully. He lifted a hand from the water to shield his optics as Sunstorm's deadly halo ebbed and grew in menacing pulses.

Sunstorm turned at the neck. His optics shone a vacant neon yellow. He seemed to stare through Ratchet rather than at him, so overcome by emotion, logical processing was taking a backseat.

Ratchet had terrible flashbacks to that night in the forest. But he had been on the ground then, hundreds of feet away. Far from face-to-face with this.

"Sunstorm, can you see me?" Ratchet climbed to his feet, legs shaking.

Confusion flittered across the seeker's face, before it hardened swiftly to fury. Sunstorm's

expression twisted into something demonic, "*You.*"

"Sunstorm, listen to me!" Ratchet began in a rush, both hands held up in front of him. "Starscream's safe. He's outside, on his way home. You've got to get out of here before you overheat the hyperfuel-"

"Where is my brother?!" Sunstorm took a threatening step forward.

The accompanying flare of heat had Ratchet stumbling back. His HUD filled with warnings as radiation began interfering with circuits. "He's safe!"

"You took him!"

"I didn't- I didn't take him, Sunstorm, I promise you."

Sunstorm's glare sharpened. Fear gripped Ratchet's spark as he realised he wouldn't be able to talk his way out of this. Sunstorm didn't trust him, wouldn't believe him, and didn't care about him enough to listen to what he had to say.

He shrank back against the wall. Sunstorm's unearthly glow chased away the shadows and left him with no where to hide, "Sunstorm..."

"Stop!" A sudden cry then almighty crash of water halted Sunstorm's advance.

Flood water rose up and splashed Ratchet as someone plummeted from the broken stairwell and fell into the water. They rose with a splutter and curse, wings shaking themselves free of water. "Disgusting-!"

"Brother?" Sunstorm's glow dimmed like a smothered flame, plunging them into near darkness and making it impossible for Ratchet to tell if it really was Starscream.

But it had better not be!

Splashing footsteps and the growing, faint, seeker-shaped yellow outline meant Sunstorm was moving towards them. A sudden crash of water and shrill demand of, "Don't touch me, you moron!" meant it was *indeed* Starscream.

Ratchet was horrified.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed!" He roared through the darkness.

"Are *you*?!" Came Starscream's furious response. "He was about to kill you-!"

"I would destroy a thousand Autobots to avenge you, brother," Sunstorm promised softly, sincerely, the doting (though infuriating) brother once again. His mood swings were terrifyingly swift.

"Yes, we know!" Ratchet barked. "Look at what you've done!"

Perhaps shouting wasn't the best idea. Visibility returned as Sunstorm's glow increased. Starscream splashed water at him. "Stop it! You'll ignite the hyperfuel!"

So much for wanting to blow everyone up. At least Starscream had some sense left.

But trying to reprimand Sunstorm was like trying to shame a brick wall. Ratchet couldn't *see*, but he just knew Sunstorm was wearing a contrary expression. "Primus watches over us, brother. We

have nothing to fear."

"What about everyone else?!" Ratchet snapped, climbing back to his feet. There was a low, draw out groan of metal somewhere above them, like a monster stirring in the deep. This argument could take place somewhere the ceiling *wasn't* likely to collapse on them.

"We're all together now so let's leave. Quickly." He waved his hands to hurry the seekers along.

He surveyed the broken stairs. Sunstorm and Starscream could use their thrusters to jump it, but he was too old and too hurt to even contemplate it. He could ask for a boost, but Sunstorm would melt his aft off and Starscream was a-

"Freeze."

Ratchet only knew one person who could sound so cool and unaffected by their present situation. He turned slowly, dreading what he knew he would see.

"Prowl..." He sighed, turning towards the dark corridor behind them.

Prowl's blaster appeared first, perfectly parallel to the floor, the hand gripping it strong and steady, pointed directly Sunstorm's befuddled face. His frame followed, manifesting out of the shadows. Expression stoic and unreasonable.

"Step away from the Decepticons, Ratchet."

"Don't shoot," Starscream held up his hands, pale with fright at the thought of repeating what had happened last time Sunstorm had been shot, and what had happened to him as a result.

"Prowl, listen to him," Ratchet tried, stepping out in front of the blaster.

Prowl sidestepped him to re-obtain his shot. "On your knees," He ordered the seekers, flicking the blaster downwards. "Now."

Sunstorm, unsurprisingly, did no such thing. "Your mortal weapons cannot intimidate me."

Starscream made a mournful noise, shuttering his optics. "We're going to die down here."

"Prowl, the ship is on fire!" Ratchet argued. "You can hold us hostage *outside*!"

"The ship is on fire because of *this one*," Prowl's piercing optics narrowed further at Sunstorm.

"This *thing*. What are you?"

Sunstorm smiled, opening his arms and starting to shine, "Why, the presence anointed to carry forth the light, of course."

Starscream flinched away, staggering through the water and bumping into the bulkhead, "Turn the light *down*, Sunstorm-!"

"This light protects us, brother. Defends us against the unworthy, and the undeserving."

The heat became too much. Ratchet stumbled back from Sunstorm's glow, joining Starscream at the bulkhead and shielding him against the waves of radiation. "Sunstorm, that light protects *you*! It hurts Starscream!"

"Nonsense," Sunstorm set his gaze on Prowl, who was having to shield himself with his free arm, but still held the blaster. Ratchet noticed his hand had begun to shake. "Primus's judgement is swift

but fair. Only the sinful burn at it's touch-"

Another blast of heat hit. Ratchet hissed, the sensors across his back alight with pain as he was burned.

Prowl gasped aloud, flinching back as smoke came off his armour. But he came back, fiercely determined and resolved against the heat. His thumb flicked the safety off the blaster.

"No!" Starscream shouted, breaking free of Ratchet's hold and darting out between them.

Spark drumming in his chest, Ratchet threw himself after him, grabbing Starscream roughly by the wing to fling him away from Sunstorm *and* Prowl's blaster.

The bang was loud enough to ring Ratchet's audials, it's suddenness causing him to flinch and stumble with Starscream into the water. He landed on top of Starscream and in the sickly glow of light cast by Sunstorm, Ratchet could see energon, bright and pink, swirling through the dark water. A lot of it. It's smell sharp and pungent.

"Prowl, you idiot!" Ratchet yanked the stunned Starscream out of the water to see him better, looking for the wound, but Sunstorm had dimmed to a inconsiderately faint ember and so he had to use his headlamps again.

"Where is it?" Ratchet muttered, handling Starscream roughly. There was a lot of energon. It was sitting atop the water surrounding them. A mainline must have been hit. "Starscream, where were you hit!?" He snapped.

Starscream didn't answer. He was likely in shock. There was a huge slash of energon across his torso, more staining his open blue hands. The ruined ship was silent and cold and dark and Starscream was being a blasted idiot and wouldn't answer him and-

A hand fell to Ratchet's shoulder. Prowl, kneeling down next to him. Ratchet had almost forgotten him. He was no longer holding his stupid blaster, but was trying to pull him away from Starscream.

Impatient, Ratchet went to shove him off but found he didn't have the energy.

"Let go of him," Prowl ordered, taking his wrist.

Ratchet tightened his grip, even though Starscream appeared to pull away himself, "Frag off, Prowl! You shot him!"

"Ratchet," Prowl said firmly, expression sombre and fearful, "You need to let go so we can stop the leak. You're haemorrhaging."

"Do something useful for once in your miserable life and help me find the wound!" Ratchet argued.

Sunstorm loomed over them, his radioactive output dimmed down to the barest tickle. "Perhaps the healing powers of Primus-"

"No healing hands!" Starscream finally spoke, shrill and panicked. Wide optics darted between Ratchet's face and chest, just as Prowl finally got close enough to Ratchet to-

"Agh!" Ratchet cried when Prowl's hand met his chest plate and *pressed*.

Heat flared through his spark. The shock of it took him by surprise, stealing the air from his vents and replacing it with something hot and liquid. He choked, tasting energon in his mouth.

He felt it then. Starscream hadn't taken Prowl's blaster bolt. He had. Right through the chest. Sunstorm's radiation had knocked out his HUD warning system. It hadn't so much as flashed at him.

He felt suddenly faint. Too faint to stay upright. Prowl was still with him, speaking slowly and calmly.

"See what happens..." Ratchet breathed raggedly, letting himself lean his weight on Prowl. His limbs felt heavy and useless. "...what happens when you try to solve all your problems ...with a blaster?"

"He's delirious," he heard Prowl tell Starscream.

"Primus, I hate you," Ratchet slurred.

His world had begun to swim, as dark and dismal as it was. Of all the places to die. Of all the people to be with him...

Starscream was speaking. Sound was muffled but Ratchet could pick out the words, the names; Skywarp, Optimus, Megatron.

Ratchet hoped they weren't arguing, but that would be just his luck. Missing out on essential medical care because everyone hated each other too much to cooperate just once.

The dark fog was beginning to close in. Cold, and too tired to argue any longer, Ratchet slipped into the black without any resistance at all.

Hell Of An Armistice To Have Slept Through

Ratchet came to on a comfortable berth, in a warm, silent room. An underlying but implacable sense of dread plagued him, like he was waking from a nightmare that had felt all too real.

He sucked in a deep breath, and allowed his optics to online as cautious slits.

Natural sunlight streamed in through a window to his right, and that alone was evidence enough to tell him he wasn't at the Decepticon base. But he wasn't in the Ark either. The view outside was unfamiliar, of green rolling hills, beyond which sat a shining human city.

He pushed himself up to sit back against the headrest. The fingers of his left hand brushed his thigh and he drew it out from beneath the covers to find it no longer clumsily and over-sized. 'Barricade's Left' had been removed and replaced with a near exact replica of his original hand. He flexed it, wriggling his fingers. It would never replace the one he'd lost, but it was better than anything he could have hoped for.

His confusion continued to mount when he took in the sight of the table beside his berth, crammed full of junk. A stack of data-pads, little parcels of goodies, and dozens of printed cards -the sort humans would send each other. One in particular stood out for being completely blank. Bemused, Ratchet picked it up and flipped it open.

'*Recover*', it said, and signed at the bottom, '*Prowl*'.

And literally nothing else.

Ratchet set it back down with a sigh. It was the thought that counted, but Prowl could have at least apologised for *shooting* him.

With a sudden jolt of memory, Ratchet sat further up, remembering the chaos and devastation of his last waking hours. He threw the covers off, needing to know what had happened, who else had been hurt, where he was?

Prowl's card indicated that he was back with the Autobots, but what had happened to the Ark? Had it blown up? Taking friends from either side with it? Where was Starscream? Had he gotten out?!

Aware that he as panicking but unable to calm himself down as the unanswered questions continued to flood in, Ratchet stumbled out of the berth, knocking over and smashing a small vase of flowers. The sound must have alerted someone outside because the next instant the door opened. A concerned Wheeljack and First Aid went to move through the doorway at the exact same time and became stuck.

"Jack!"

"Sorry!" Wheeljack forced himself through and staggered into the room. First Aid shot him an exasperated look before turning to Ratchet, expression softening into a smile. "You've no idea how happy I am to see you again, Ratchet."

"You've been seeing him all week," Wheeljack said, bending to clean up the glass and flowers.

"I meant see him *conscious*," First Aid said, testily.

"A week," Ratchet repeated. His spark ached dully. He brought his hand to his chest plate, but it

was smooth and polished. There was no evidence any injury had even taken place. It was good work, but a whole week? He frowned. "A week for a blaster wound?"

"There were burns, as well," First Aid explained. "You and a dozen others. And we were short on parts, and hands, and-"

"-and on medbays," Wheeljack finished for him, standing with the bent and crushed flowers bunched up in his hand. He passed over the little card that had come with them. "Plus, we made the executive decision to keep you in stasis a little longer for recovery."

Ratchet snatched the offered card off him, angry, "You deliberately kept me unconscious?!"

"There was a lot happening! And your gasket-pressure was pretty high, Ratch'," Wheeljack shrugged.

"Of course it was high! How could it not have been high?! Did you *see* what was happening?!"

First Aid and Wheeljack looked apologetic, but for the most part, not regretful. Huffing in disbelief, Ratchet glanced down at the card for the flowers, reading the neat cursive, '*Get well soon, Ratchet! It hasn't been the same without you, love Carly.*'"

Followed by a row of 'x's he presumed were kisses, and a heart.

Something in Ratchet melted a little. He swallowed, then cleared his vocaliser, loudly and gruffly, "So who was hurt?"

"You," Wheeljack said bluntly.

"I meant *who else*?"

"Prowl was pretty cooked and Prime broke a few knuckles, but it was mostly superficial stuff," Wheeljack shrugged. "Looked worse than it was. Think the Ark took the brunt of the damage."

"It was destroyed in the fight," First Aid elaborated, "it'll be a while before we can rebuild."

"I was in there," Ratchet struggled to think back. The events of that day were blurred by his long stasis, and, he suspected, a little trauma. "I went down into the lower decks. I was in there with Prowl, and ...*Starscream*." He sucked in a sharp breath. "Where is he? Were any Decepticons hurt?"

"A few. Nothing serious."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure," Wheeljack sounded amused. "It's been a busy week here, but no one died. Things are good."

Things were *good*?!

Ratchet looked between them, confused. With all that had happened he expected the mood to be more ...sombre. For them to be more closed off towards him. He had been on the verge of being declared a traitor. He'd freed Decepticon prisoners. And he'd punched *Prowl* -even if he had deserved it and had well and truly gotten his revenge by *shooting* him.

"What happened?" He asked again, more hesitantly this time. "Am I prisoner here?"

First Aid blinked, "What? No! You're a patient! My patient."

"But after what happened..." Ratchet trailed off, realising he had blacked out before the end of the fight. It seemed hard to believe that no one had died. That things hadn't escalated into planetary destruction. "...What did happen?"

"Yeah, well," Wheeljack scratched the back of his head. "We wish we could fill in the blanks, Ratch', but we don't really know what went down either. There's at least six different versions floating around about how you got out."

"Inferno told me that that mental golden seeker said Primus himself descended from the stars and pulled you from the wreckage of the Ark," Wheeljack shook his head. "Which is actually more believable than Prowl's version of the story..."

There was a lot to unpack there. Ratchet stared. "Inferno spoke to Sunstorm?"

"No, I think he was preaching loudly and Inferno just happened to overhear him while he was working to put out the last fires," First Aid wrung his hands together awkwardly. "Prowl says Skywarp teleported Megatron to the Ark and *he* carried you out."

Ratchet couldn't even come up with a response to *that*.

"...And Starscream says *he* was the one to drag you to safety," Wheeljack filled in. "Which is even more ridiculous."

Ratchet turned away from them, trying to process things. He looked out through the large window, wetting dry lips with his tongue. Whatever version was the truth, he still owed a debt of gratitude to Starscream. Had he not come after him, Sunstorm might well have killed him. Prowl would have walked into a very different scene, and likely lost his own life as a result.

"I need to see Optimus," Ratchet decided. "Is he here?"

"Everyone's here," Wheeljack nodded. "But seeing him's gonna depend on if your medic wants to discharge you."

Ratchet looked to First Aid, who held up his hand, "Not me."

Ratchet squinted. "Then who else-?"

As if summoned by mysterious and unholy forces -though more likely, the skills of eavesdropping- Knock Out swept into the room, arms folded smugly across his front and Ratchet's medical file hanging from perfectly manicured digits.

"Well," he purred, looking Ratchet up and down. "I suppose it was nice while it lasted. Welcome back to the land of the living, Ratchet."

Ratchet blinked hard, trying to dispel the illusion. Knock Out was stood in front of him. In what he had presumed was Autobot territory. Neither First Aid nor Wheeljack looked particularly disturbed by his presence.

"What..."

"I came by with your new hand," Knock Out used his medical file to point. "You're welcome, by the way. I normally charge upwards of six-figures for a custom job like that but seeing as we're friends, It's on the house."

"What- what are you doing here?" Ratchet demanded.

Knock Out didn't answer. He tutted, scribbling something down on to the file. "Your audials must be malfunctioning. But I suppose that's to be expected at your age-"

Ratchet felt his frustration rise. He pointed. "Now wait just a minute-!"

"Ratchet, please," Knock Out implored in a rage-inducing sarcastic purr, smirk playing across his features, "Calm down. Think of your gasket pressure."

"If someone doesn't tell me what's going on right now I'm going to *lose it!*" Ratchet roared.

"I think you already lost it," Wheeljack inched away from him.

After several more minutes of Knock Out dodging questions and First Aid and Wheeljack being deliberately vague, they seemed to realise that Ratchet tiring himself out by shouting at them wasn't going to work -particularly not after a week in stasis and the several months before that spent accumulating repressed rage. He was undoubtedly going to need to see a psychiatrist after all of this. He would be billing Megatron and Optimus jointly for his anger management sessions.

The reason for the extended, one-sided shouting match was because Optimus was 'busy', apparently. Or at least, that was the excuse Wheeljack and First Aid were sticking to. Knock Out, however, lived for the potential drama an emotionally unstable person could reap and gleefully discharged him from the medbay before volunteering to take him to Optimus himself.

"Wonderful," First Aid announced in a tone that implied he thought it was anything but, clapping his hands together. "If anyone asks, I wasn't here, and I had no part in this."

"You're just gonna..." Wheeljack anxiously waved his hands about. "...interrupt them?"

"Interrupt what?" Ratchet demanded, stopping just inside the threshold.

Knock Out placed his hands on his shoulders and urged him on, ignoring his question and smiling deviously at Wheeljack. "I know Prime makes it sound oh-so-severe to you Autobots, but if it really was, wouldn't someone have been injured by now? Or at least cried?"

"Didn't Prowl cry?" Wheeljack frowned.

"Prowl can't cry," Ratchet interjected.

"He's right," First Aid, who Ratchet had thought had checked out of the conversation, agreed. "Prowl can't cry. He can only flip furniture."

Knock Out managed to get him out into the corridor. The door shut behind them before Wheeljack could follow them out.

Ratchet was momentarily distracted from his questions by the change of scene. It hadn't been so obvious in the room he'd woken up in, but the human-led architecture was beginning to stand out. The materials were of Earth and seemed to be temporary, and most rooms had a second set of miniature doors designed for human use. It had been built quickly, and was hardly going to stand up against a Decepticon attack.

"Where are we?" He asked again.

"Temporary living quarters." Knock Out explained, walking ahead of him. "Ark's not really habitable at the moment. The walls, ceilings, and floors were spontaneously removed."

"Why are *you* here?"

Knock Out glanced back at him with a smirk. "To look after you, obviously."

"This is an Autobot base," Ratchet growled, picking up his pace.

"Did I say that?"

Ratchet stopped in the middle of the deserted corridor, folding his arms stubbornly. Knock Out walked a few steps ahead before sighing and turning back to face him. "Alright, yes," he admitted. "It's a temporary Autobot base."

"Then why are *you* here?!" Ratchet demanded, anxious and frustrated by the absence of explanations. "Did you defect? I needed you to stay with them. They need at least one decent medic."

"They'll have more than one," Knock Out took off at a strut, waving at him to follow. "Quickly now."

Ratchet knew he wasn't likely to get any answers so he stood out in the corridor, so he stalked after Knock Out, hands clenched at his sides. "Where is everyone?"

Knock Out shrugged, coming to a halt before a set of double doors. "My guess is they're at the Ark-site. They leave with a crew every morning to help clean up the radioactive waste. It's even worse for humans, you know? Who'd have figured."

"Anyone with common sense," Ratchet snapped, thinking of Spike and Sparkplug and Carly.

"Well, you'll be happy to hear no humans were poisoned during the last great battle of the Cybertronian Civil War," Knock Out smiled, entering a code into the door controls.

Ratchet's frown faltered, "...What do you mean 'last'?"

The doors parted down the middle to reveal a modest conference room. A large oval-shaped table took up most of the room, and sat at it, in the middle of a meeting, were the last six mechs Ratchet would ever have expected to all see in the same place.

Optimus, Prowl, and Jazz turned at the sound of the doors opening. Ratchet's mouth fell open and hung from its hinges stupidly. He was speechless.

Because across from them sat Megatron, Starscream, and Soundwave. And they were all sitting around, holding data-pads and light-pens and scribbling notes and looking like they were part of one of the more productive study groups Ratchet had seen around during his academy days.

"Do you *mind*?" Starscream snapped, whipping off a pair of glasses to maximise the strength of his glare.

A chair scraped back as Optimus stood, blue optics sparkling with delight, "Ratchet!"

Ratchet felt like he had stalled. He didn't seem capable of forming a reaction to the scene before him. He was being encased in a warm, firm Optimus-hug before he knew it. But by the time he

was released Jazz was there clapping his shoulder, then a guilt-ridden Prowl was murmuring soft apologies that he couldn't even hear over the sound of Starscream picking an argument with Knock Out.

"-don't you understand about vital personal *only*, bimbo?!"

"Well I knew you would be in here, Starscream, so I suppose I was confused."

"Why you-!"

The sound of Starscream gearing up for a rant snapped Ratchet right out of his stupor. He whipped around, ready to pull them apart, only to find himself faced with a towering wall of silver armour.

He looked up with a start, up into Megatron's frowning face.

"Uh..." was all he managed.

Megatron cocked an eye ridge, optics darting over his frame. "You're looking much better than when I last saw you."

Ratchet found he couldn't speak.

"Ah, my favourite medic!" Starscream interrupted, darting around Megatron to place himself between them, ignoring Knock Out's offended 'Hey!'

"Starscream," Ratchet greeted him back, so glad to see him alive and well that he struggled to stuff down a powerful urge to hug him. "Thank you," he said warmly, "for coming after me."

Starscream opened his mouth to reply when a huge black hand closed over the lower half of his face and tugged him away. Starscream's protest was muffled by Megatron unrelenting fingers.

"Don't thank him," Megatron growled, tucking his seeker into a headlock that was really a little too heavy handed for a carrying mech to have to endure. "He's still in trouble for that."

"Are you trying to pop my head off?!" A red-faced Starscream protested from the crook of Megatron's massive arm.

"Knock Out," Optimus called to the additional medic, who was gleefully watching Starscream struggle in Megatron's grip. "Thank you for all your hard work. You're excused."

"Sure. See you at dinner, sir," Knock Out fired off a seductive salute, and paused to wink at Ratchet before leaving.

Ratchet turned to Optimus, "This is a fever dream. My blaster wound must have gotten infected, and now I'm dying."

"You're not dying, Ratchet," Optimus told him calmly.

"Nor dead," Jazz added.

"So you're-" Ratchet span on the spot, looking from Soundwave gathering together files, to Prowl setting out *drinks*, and back to Optimus politely ignoring Starscream and Megatron wrestling. "-you're *talking* now?!"

"That's a generous way of putting things, considering how often stuff like this happens," Jazz said quietly, thumbing towards the spectacle Decepticon High Command was making. "But, we're

getting there."

Ratchet couldn't believe what he was hearing. To have gone from carnage of the week before, to speaking over a conference table-

"But... The Ark-?"

"-was evacuated," Prowl joined them, handing Ratchet a cube, and then -in a moment that would forever be seared into Ratchet's mind- handing the second to Megatron. Starscream finally slipped free of his leader's grip and escaped to the other side of the table, hiding behind Soundwave.

"As you know, I do not approve of you sharing our secrets with the enemy," Prowl continued, picking up his own cube and studying it. "But without Skywarp's familiarity with the Ark's layout, we might not have made it out in time."

Ratchet held his cube a little tighter, nodding. "That Skywarp. He's ...he's a good kid."

"He's a thief," Prowl reminded him, but at Ratchet's scowl he relented, "but I suppose if bygones are to be bygones..."

"Our medbays were destroyed," Optimus continued to fill him in, "Starscream offered the use of the Decepticons repair bay, and to our surprise, Megatron did not object." Optimus raised his gaze towards the mech in question, and it was obvious he was smiling under the mask.

Megatron sneered, "I had my own reasons."

"Were they the same reasons you agreed to the truce?" Jazz baited him, taking a sip of his own cube.

Megatron's sneer graduated into a full blown grimace.

"Well it looks like we've accomplished all we can today," Starscream, having decided it was safe to be in Megatron's proximity without being manhandled, reappeared at his side. He subspaced his own energon, and then plucked the cube out of Megatron's hand and stored that away too. Megatron stared at his empty hand, dejected.

"It's barely noon," Prowl glared.

"Well I'm pregnant and I'm tired, and I'm still recovering from that time someone *stunned* me, *twice*," Starscream reminded everyone through tightly clenched denta. Suitably chastised, Prowl stepped back.

"You're leaving?" Ratchet's fuel tank swooped with disappointment.

"Why, did you want me to sleep over?" Starscream smirked at him teasingly. Ratchet wished he wouldn't. Not with Megatron *looming* like that behind him. "I'm flattered, but I wouldn't want to step on any toes. You're already spoken for, aren't you?"

Ratchet wasn't sure what he meant by that but before he could think of a comeback, Starscream extended his hand. Ratchet reached out to shake it, but Starscream used it to pull him into a hug instead.

Ratchet returned it without a thought, arms loose around him so not to squeeze too tight. Cheek-to-cheek, he felt Starscream's mouth lift into a smile -and in the next instant a sly kiss was being pressed to the corner of his mouth.

Ratchet's face plates were molten with embarrassment as a grumbling Megatron pulled Starscream away and steered him toward the doors.

"We'll fuel together tomorrow!" Starscream called to him, "Don't stand me up!"

The doors stayed open for Soundwave, who gave Ratchet a short nod before following. The doors closed, and in the Decepticons' absence, the room was awkwardly quiet.

Jazz whistled, "You and Starscream?!"

"No!" Ratchet snapped, embarrassment resurfacing. "No, of course not!"

Jazz held up his hands. "Hey, no judgment. He's attractive. When he's not talking."

"And Megatron would kill me if I so much as looked at him," Ratchet pointed. "And anyone else, for that matter."

"We'll keep that in mind," Optimus murmured, sitting back at the table with a deep sigh. "It's going to be a difficult transition."

"But you think this can work?" Ratchet took the seat next to him. "This- this- *whatever* this is?"

"An armistice, which we hope to turn into something more permanent. Megatron has responded well to the incentives we're offering, but Prowl has some doubts over the longevity of this plan."

Ratchet glared, "What a surprise..."

"There is a possibility of the Decepticon faction reverting to old habits after the emergence of Starscream's sparkling," Prowl informed him coolly, still as tenacious as ever.

"You think they're only on good behaviour because their second in command is sparked?" Ratchet leaned back in his seat. "Yeah. Probably."

"Then you understand-"

"I *understand* that we may never have another opportunity like this," Ratchet interrupted. "They're playing happy families with us because Megatron has figured out that an amicable relationship with us means less fighting, more fuel, and a easier time for Starscream. Which even an idiot like him knows is best thing for his sparkling. So that gives us ten years- maybe more if he wants to secure a peaceful few decades after the emergence- to figure this out."

He looked around at them, pleased to see that, unlike last time, he was being listen to. "That's plenty of time to build bridges, to integrate them into surface-life on this planet, and to make it impossible for Megatron to go back on his word if he gets bored of peacetime later. That sparkling of Starscream's is going to be a horrible, spoilt little monster and each and every single one of us is going to make sure we're fun uncles, got it?!"

Jazz laughed, "Prowl? A *fun* uncle?"

"Do not blow this for us," Ratchet pointed at Prowl.

"Oh Ratchet," Optimus's gentle baritone rumbled warmly, "How I've missed you."

Ratchet smiled despite himself, "I missed you too, Optimus."

For Ratchet, next few days were spent reacquainting himself with friends, both Autobot and Decepticon. There were obvious tensions in areas of the base where the two groups had to mingle, but with Megatron sending mechs to Ark-site everyday to help with the repairs, bonds through labour were already forming.

The most unlikely of those friendships was responsible for nailing him in the back of the head with a 'water ballon' three days after he'd first woken up. The 'ballon' in question actually being a exercise ball filled with water, and thrown at him with such force, he was nearly knocked off his feet.

"What the-!?"

Soaked, he whipped around in time to see Sideswipe grabbing Skywarp for an emergency warp-escape. "Go, go, go!"

"Don't you dare teleport, Skywarp!" Ratchet shouted in a rush, pointing at them. Skywarp froze, his amusement faltering. Seeing his partner in crime fail him, Sideswipe rushed around behind Skywarp to use his black wings as cover.

Ratchet stalked forward and set his hands on his hips. "Well?"

"Sorry," Sideswipe's head popped back up and flashed him an unrepentant grin.

"Sorry," Skywarp followed suit, with even less sincerity.

"So neither of you have anything better to do, I see?" Ratchet wiped water away from his face.

"We finished for the day," Skywarp shrugged. "And I was kinda missing you. Wanted to say sorry too. For being such a jerk."

"...You wanted to apologise to me, so you threw a water-filled exercise ball at the back of my head?"

Skywarp glanced at Sideswipe, "Well, yeah."

"I forgive you." Ratchet sighed, "but only because you saved my life. And Prowl's life. Even after what had happened."

"I didn't activity save his life, he just happened to be there," Skywarp explained. "Would have been a real dick-move to just leave him behind though."

"A *what* move?"

"Dick-move," Skywarp thumbed back at Sideswipe. "It's Earth slang. Sides' is teaching me the local lingo."

"*Sides*." Ratchet repeated the nickname numbly, realising suddenly how dangerous this alliance of troublemakers was. The combined stupidity, with Skywarp's powers...

Primus help them.

"Listen," he began awkwardly, "You haven't seen Drift around, have you?"

Skywarp looked blank.

"Deadlock," Ratchet clarified.

"Oooh, *him*," Skywarp nodded in recognition. "He was burnt pretty bad during the ...thing. Had to go back to Cybertron to be repaired. They didn't have the spare parts here."

Ratchet's throat had closed up. He swallowed, but something seemed to have lodged itself in there. "...Is he alright?"

"Think so. Haven't heard otherwise."

Ratchet flexed his fingers, "You wouldn't happen to know when he'll be back?"

"Er," Skywarp scratched his head, "I dunno if he's coming back. He's more of a special operative than a solider, if you know what I mean."

Ratchet ran a hand over his face, looking away from Skywarp as his optics began to ache. "I- I wanted to- there was something I wanted to tell him."

Skywarp began pressing buttons of his wrist comm, "I can send you his frequency?"

"No I-," Ratchet stepped back, "No, I only wanted to say goodbye."

Sideswipe stepped around Skywarp, "Hey, you okay Ratch'?"

"I'm fine," Ratchet was grateful that his face was already wet from their prank. He turned away before it became too obvious, "You two stay out of trouble."

He walked swiftly back to his room, and made sure to lock the door behind him.

Disarmed And On Their Way

"You're distracted."

"Maybe you're just not as enthralling as you like to think you are," Ratchet mumbled back.

Across the table from him, enjoying the privilege of Autobot hospitality and his condition as an expectant creator, Starscream set down the extra-large serving of energon he'd swindled off some unsuspecting Bot and scowled at Ratchet. "I don't have to be here, you know."

"Yes, you do," Ratchet rubbed his thumb over a droplet of fuel running down the side of his cube. "You're here for the unnecessarily large fuel servings - but you can't let on that you're using us as a bottomless fuel dispenser so you're pretending you're integral to these peace talks."

"Firstly," Starscream pointed at him. "I *am* integral to the peace talks. I'm the only thing stopping Prime and Megatron getting violent when they disagree, and they disagree *a lot*. And secondly, this is exactly the right amount of fuel for me. I'm *sparked*."

"You're barely a month in," Ratchet eyed the oversized cube, which took Starscream two hands just to lift. "You're not carrying a titan, Starscream."

"I don't know how long this happy-peace-time nonsense is going to last, alright," Starscream leaned in to hiss quietly. "And if that little twit Bumblebee is going to be so overgenerous I might as well stockpile while I can."

Ratchet frowned, "The peace is going to last."

"Sure, I'll take your word for it."

"Starscream," Ratchet became serious. "So long as I'm here, you'll always have enough fuel. Peace or no peace."

A smile curved Starscream's mouth, "Why Ratchet, are you offering to commit treason for me, again? You really must love me."

"That's not the word I would use." Ratchet grumbled. "Drink your super-sized cube and shut up."

Starscream interlocked his fingers and set his chin atop them with a smile. "When I asked for you to join me for fuelling, I didn't intend for us to sit in silence."

"I did, when I accepted," Ratchet grunted.

"I thought you might have missed me."

"I haven't had time to miss you."

"Yes, of course. *You* spent the whole week asleep and blissfully unaware of the disastrous results of your actions."

"I wasn't asleep, I was unconscious," Ratchet began. "And what do you mean *my* actions?!"

"I'm not blaming you," Starscream reassured in a tone far from genuine or soothing. "But if you hadn't strung that stupid spy Autobot along with promises that you were going to come back *eventually* and used my condition as an excuse not to, they wouldn't have kidnapped me."

"I didn't-!" Ratchet bit the inside of his cheek to keep from yelling. "I wasn't stringing anyone along. I was never going to stay with you *indefinitely*."

"Such a waste," Starscream rolled his optics, "You could have risen so much higher within our ranks. You could have had my personal favour."

"I'm not sure I want it," Ratchet wrinkled his nose at the thought. At Starscream's offended pout, he sighed. "Just because we're on opposite sides, doesn't mean we can't still be friends."

"I have enough *friends*."

"Name one," Ratchet challenged. "And they can't be trine because Thundercracker and Skywarp have no choice but to put up with you."

It was testament to the warped nature of Starscream's relationship with Megatron that he didn't say his name. Starscream sat across from him looking constipated for five minutes before the figurative lightbulb finally turned on. "Actually, I think you'll be pleased to hear I made a promising ally among the Autobot ranks in your absence."

Ratchet *was* intrigued -but also a little apprehensive after seeing the product of the Skywarp/Sideswipe alliance. "...Really?"

"Yes, really." Starscream smirked. "Carly."

"*Carly*?!" Ratchet almost knocked over his own cube. "She's a teenage girl!"

"Exactly," Starscream steepled his fingers together menacingly. "I have seen the value in cultivating relationships with some of the homo sapiens that rule this planet. Her youth will also be of use. Their species die so quickly there's little point in investing in one likely to die in less than half a century."

"Leave Carly alone." Ratchet warned, deadly serious. "I mean it. She's a nice girl. I don't want her on any terrorist watch-lists because you foisted a friendship on her."

"I foisted nothing!"

"I find it hard to believe she'd extend the hand of friendship to a psychotic war criminal."

"She's friends with your lot, isn't she?"

Ratchet shut his mouth. Starscream had him there.

"And you'll be interested to know that she *did* reach out to me," Starscream's expression became unreadable. "She heard I was carrying and it appears such an occasion is worthy of celebration even among humans. She presented me with a gift basket, as is, allegedly, the tradition."

Ratchet was mildly impressed that Starscream hadn't incinerated the thoughtful gift right in front of poor Carly's eyes. "...A gift basket? Of what?"

Starscream waved his hand. "Tat and nonsense. But one thing did have some use."

He leant away from the table and popped open his cockpit canopy. The glass slid away to expose the interior, and there, green and pine-tree shaped, dangling from the controls, was an air freshener.

"It's pine scented."

Ratchet shook his head, struggling with his own disbelief, "If I'd known all it took to win you over was a cheap air freshener..."

"For you, it'd take far more," Starscream warned. And with that, he subspaced away his cube (still three-quarters full) and stood.

"You're taking an awfully long time to drink that." He nodded at Ratchet's own modest half-drunk serving. "We're going to be late. You're not avoiding something, are you?"

He was. But he wasn't about to tell Starscream that.

"Someone as self-involved as you shouldn't be this perceptive," Ratchet lifted the cube and drank down the rest, soldiering past the ache in his tanks that had robbed him of his appetite. "Are you sure it's not you who's in love with me?"

"I love nothing," Starscream waited for him to stand before moving towards the mess exit. Either he didn't think Ratchet would make it to the temporary base's negotiation room if left to his own devices, or he wanted the company on the walk.

"That's not true, I heard you and Sunstorm made up," Ratchet teased, joining Starscream and setting an ambling pace to prevent the seeker from charging off at his usual excessive speed.

"We were never-!" Starscream made a noise of childish frustration, stamping a foot. "Sunstorm is an accident of coding. Just because my spark happened to split at the moment of creation and spawn him, doesn't mean I should be expected to build a familiar relationship with him. He's a *subordinate*."

"It might be too late for that."

"Well, he's gone," Starscream snapped fiercely. "I sent him away."

Ratchet said nothing, watching Starscream as they walked. After a few steps of silence, Starscream's cheeks bloomed with colour. He began to study the ceiling, mouth set into a hard line.

"...He's on Cybertron undergoing additional tests with Shockwave," Starscream eventually mumbled.

"I'd like to see the results of those tests."

"So would I," Starscream complained, rolling his optics. "But the only way anyone's getting them out of Shockwave's clutches is by wresting them from him personally, and I can't go. Megatron has ...advised against my use of the space bridge."

Ratchet frowned, "You're safe to bridge."

"I know that," Starscream said testily. "Megatron's just using it as an excuse to keep me away from him."

Ratchet couldn't say he blamed Megatron. Sunstorm (whatever his inventions were at any given time) was exceptionally dangerous. He had nearly killed him, had nearly killed Starscream *twice*, and seeing as he had utterly destroyed the Ark (and the ecosystem surrounding it for thousands of years to come) it was unlikely he'd find a great deal of friends among Autobots and humans, no matter how successful the bid for peace was.

Sending him off to Shockwave -as unenviable as the Chief Decepticon Scientist's company was- was the best call, for now.

They'd continue to work on methods of containing his radiation, and with any luck, he'd be back on Earth in time to see the arrival of his nibbling. And subsequently complain profusely to Starscream that they had been sparked out of wedlock.

It was a strange combination of comfort and disappointment to know he wasn't going to jump out at them at any given moment though.

"It was easier to ignore him when he was on planet," Starscream was grumbling, half to himself. "Before, I could hide from him. Now? Now he just sends huge data-dumps straight into my commlink and they're all marked 'urgent'. A list of sparkling names is *not* urgent!"

"Don't worry, he'll be back in no time." Ratchet suppressed a smile at Starscream's apprehensiveness. "Working together, we'll have a solution in no time. And then, when it's safe for him to step foot on an organic planet again, you can go back to ignoring him in person."

"Joy."

Ratchet could understand Starscream's conflicted feelings on the matter. To find family where before there had been none, would be an adjustment for anyone. And Starscream wasn't prone to adjusting, and Sunstorm wasn't easy to adjust too. They may never be close, like Sideswipe and Sunstreaker, or Soundwave's twins, but if there was a will, there was a way. Sometimes, just wanting to be a part of each other's lives was enough to bridge that gap. Sunstorm certainly saw Starscream as family, and as much as Starscream liked to put up a front, it was clear the feeling was reciprocated.

Those comforting thoughts should have improved his mood, but he felt it sinking rapidly. His musing on Starscream's personal relationships had further highlighted the gaping hole in his own life.

"When did Drift leave?"

Starscream's pace faltered, "The assassin?"

"Drift," Ratchet corrected with a little glare. "You know his name."

"I know *Deadlock*," Starscream said with pointed distaste.

"Did Megatron send him away?" Ratchet pressed. "Did you?"

Starscream waved his hand around vaguely. "Megatron sent a few of the spares off ...somewhere. Once it became apparent the Autobots weren't luring us into a false sense of security we could afford to let a few of them go. Knock Out couldn't cope on his own and your useless medical assistant wanted to concentrate on Autobots-"

"First Aid is a good medic," Ratchet interrupted.

"Yes and he wanted to reserve those 'good' skills of his for his colleges. There just so happened to be a qualified Decepticon medic near Cybertron and rather than leave our 'brave' casualties at the mercy of an disgruntled Autobot, Megatron chose to bridge the excess injured off to her."

Ratchet felt his frustration rise, "He couldn't have let Drift stay? *You* couldn't have asked him to make an exception?"

Starscream narrowed his optics, "I could-"

"Then why?! Why ship him back off to Cybertron when you knew that I- that he was-" Ratchet stopped himself, breathing heavily. "Was it Megatron's idea of a punishment for being the reason you were kidnapped?"

"Please," Starscream snorted. "Megatron's petty but he's not *that* petty. At least, he's not if your name isn't Optimus Prime. We asked for volunteers."

Ratchet's spark plummeted. His paced slowed to a stop. "...He volunteered?"

"It would appear so."

"...Why?"

"You'll have to ask him." Starscream glanced back at him. "I have his comm frequency if you'd like to call him."

Ratchet released a shaky breath and turned away. It didn't make sense. Drift wouldn't just leave him. Not without saying anything. Not with him lying in stasis in a medberth.

It had kept him awake all night, wondering why his hadn't been the first face he saw when he'd woken up.

And he had wanted so badly for him to be there with him. He had been so set on staying, on finding a solution that would lead to peace between their factions, when all Drift had wanted to do was be with him, leave everything else behind.

"Ratchet? Are you listening to me?" Starscream's curt voice snapped him out of it. "What is this? Senility?"

"I was *thinking*, you idiot," Ratchet barked, squaring his shoulders and heading back the way he'd come. "Tell Optimus I'm skipping the negotiations this morning."

"It's your first day!" Starscream called after him. "You can't quit on the first day! We've all been waiting for you!"

Ratchet threw a hand back and kept on walking. He wasn't a babysitter. The brokering peace was the responsibly of high-command and he was tired of putting his life on hold because he had to sit and hold their hands and talk them through stuff they should have done years ago. Optimus and Megatron could pull their heads out of their own tailpipes and figure it out themselves.

Besides, they'd survived without him a full week. They could last a day or two more while he was off planet.

Getting to Cybertron wasn't going to be easy. If it were, Elita One would take regular day-trips to Earth to bully Optimus and whip his Autobots back into shape.

There were several issues with using a space bridge for interplanetary travel that made the apparent convince of them more complicated. If Skywarp's warp-drive had the reach (something Starscream claimed to one day accomplish) Ratchet would prefer to use him as a means of transport. Not only

did activating the bridge take up an extraordinary amount of energy, but when calculating the ridiculously over-complicated equations to open up the 'portal', the bridge-operator needed to take into account not only the positioning of Cybertron and Earth, but their relative velocity to one another as they moved in orbit, and through space as the universe continued to expand.

And Ratchet was a medic, not a trans-dimensional engineer.

"You know how to programme a space bridge, right?"

Skywarp, sat back-to-back with Sideswipe on the scorched earth surrounding the burnt-out husk of the Ark, glanced up at him with a clueless expression, the stick of the energon-pop he'd been sucking on sticking out of his mouth.

Sideswipe snorted, glancing over his shoulder, "Maybe you'd better ask Perceptor, Ratch'."

Skywarp frowned, pulling the treat free with a 'pop'. His tongue was blue. "No, I can do it," he insisted. "Was just wondering why. I can warp you instead?"

"I'm going off planet."

Sideswipe twisted around, "Where?"

"Is that your business?" Ratchet snapped.

Skywarp stuck the energon-pop back into his mouth and swirled it from side-to-side as he considered the request. "How come you're not asking Screamer?"

"His access was revoked. And he'd probably say no."

The corners of Skywarp's mouth curved upwards. "So you're up to something?"

"It's a *personal matter*," Ratchet said stiffly, shooting a look at Sideswipe and the unbearably curious expression he was wearing. "Will you do it or not? Yes or no?"

Skywarp pretended to think about it a moment longer, lips pursed around the stick of his energon-pop.

"Skywarp!"

"Okay, yes!" He lifted his hands. "But if anyone asks, it was for a prank."

"How do you know how to do this?!" Sideswipe asked with a quiet awe as he watched Skywarp type a lengthy set of equations into the space bridge control board.

Skywarp shrugged, "I dunno. I do it all the time in my head."

Sideswipe fired Ratchet a helpless look. Ratchet tried to convey with expression alone that it was best not to think about the seemingly limitless potential of the Decepticon seeker they'd been misled into thinking was the resident dunce for years.

"This is gonna open up into Shockwave's lab," Skywarp warned. "He's kind of a tool though, so

maybe someone should come with you."

"You got your blaster?" Sideswipe asked.

"I don't need a babysitter and I don't need a gun," Ratchet stepped into the centre of the torus shaped bridge. "I won't be in any danger."

Skywarp blinked. "...You know who Shockwave is, right?"

"Activate the bridge," Ratchet snapped.

Skywarp shrugged in a 'it's your funeral' sort of way and flicked the switch. The bridge activated with a low whirring sound that rapidly pitched up like a jet engine about to take off. Light bloomed and saturated the sensors in his optics until Sideswipe and Skywarp were barely visible.

He heard Skywarp's shout of, "Say hi to Sunstorm for us!" before the bridge tube opened with a misleading little '*blip*' of noise, and gravity rushed away from him as Earth disappeared beneath his treads.

The floor of Shockwave's lab replaced it an instant later, colder and harder against bottom of his pedes. It was darker on Cybertron, and obviously night time. His optics took a moment to adjust before they recognised the misshapen object looming beside him as a live mech.

He jumped, clutching his chest plate as his old spark stuttered dangerously in it's chamber.

Shockwave's lone yellow optic was fixed on him. More nervous than he had expected to be in the infamous Decepticon's presence, Ratchet straightened up and brushed himself off.

Shockwave wasn't particularly forthcoming with the greetings.

"...Hello?" Ratchet tried.

"Autobot. How did you gain access to the space bridge?" Shockwave demanded in his clipped, haunting cadence.

"A friend let me borrow it," Ratchet said sarcastically. "I'm looking for someone, and I need to-"

"Your needs do not interest me." Shockwave warned darkly. "You are a trespasser. And worse than that, you are an Autobot."

"What are you going to do, hold me prisoner?" Ratchet challenged, impatient. "In the middle of peace talks?"

"Negotiations towards peace are *not* equal to an official treaty," Shockwave lifted his blaster arm. "Surrender, or I will be forced to dispatch with you."

Dispatch with you? Who talked like that?! Shockwave had been left alone up here far too long.

"Fine, I've surrendered," Ratchet lifted his hands, and walked around him to actually get a look at his surroundings.

Shockwave's lab resided within a huge dome-shaped room. Equipment lined the walls, but it was mostly a massive waste of space in the centre, save for the large communications screen sat pride of place in the middle.

Asides from them, there was no one to be seen. Shockwave was alone.

He heard the whir of a weapon coming online behind him. Unimpressed, he shot Shockwave a look over his shoulder.

"I forgot to ask," he began. "How *was* your week with Soundwave? He came back in a pretty good mood."

Shockwave -whose stance already resembled someone with a pole stuck somewhere unfortunate-somehow to stiffen further.

"Soundwave ...fairs well?" He enquired, with forced and failed nonchalance.

"He's pretty stressed, what with trying to keep the negotiations on track." Ratchet pretended to be interested in a piece of lab-equipment as he spoke. Shockwave's optic followed his movements closely.

"Be a real shame if things were dragged out because some unreasonable sub-commander started taking Autobot captives just for the hell of it. Then he'd never get a break."

Shockwave's optic narrowed. Slowly, his blaster arm lowered. "I will humour you, for now."

"The Decepticons that were sent here from Earth, where did they go?" Ratchet gestured around the empty lab.

Shockwave seemed reluctant to share information.

Ratchet sighed, "Tell me and I'll make sure Soundwave is put on extended medical leave and transferred here."

"I am not easily bribed."

Ratchet folded his arms and waited.

Several moments passed until Shockwave sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat. "The grievously injured were transferred to the medbay of a nearby Decepticon ship, and I can tell you no more than that."

"Not all of them though. What about the minor injuries? What about-" Ratchet stopped, frowning as a sudden thought came to him. He should be concentrating on Drift, but, " ...what about Sunstorm?"

"That seeker has been contained and no longer possess a threat to you or your insignificant organic allies."

Shockwave's phrasing was concerning.

"What do you mean contained? You haven't locked him up?"

Shockwave's expressionless helm tilted to the side. "No cell could withstand his power."

That only concerned Ratchet more. He glared, "Then what do you *mean* by 'contained'?"

Shockwave stared him out for a moment. Ratchet narrowed his optics right back at him, thinking that things would move much quicker if he and Shockwave didn't have to partake in a mini power-play between every verbal exchange.

Finally, Shockwave turned on his heel and headed towards the lab doors. "Come."

Ratchet assumed that meant he'd won.

The lab upstairs was clean and polished and set out much like a museum. It bore a striking resemblance to the set of a sci-fi movie, in that it was a simplified version of what someone would *expect* an advanced scientific laboratory to look like. It was where Shockwave conducted day-to-day business and where he took his calls from Megatron.

Ratchet might not have noticed anything odd about it had he not also been in *Starscream's* terrifyingly chaotic lab-spaces and seen what one really looked like. The upstairs lab really was a set, all for show. For Megatron maybe, or just visitors and callers in general.

The *real* lab was on the floor below. It was a dark and gloomy deathtrap of thick cables snaking along the ground and bundles of wires hanging from the ceiling above, ready to strangle the taller visitors. There were giant tubes filled with glowing neon fluid and what looked like alien specimens -dead or alive or in the process of being grown- dotted around the room. At a distance, they looked like lava lamps. Up close, Ratchet could see the claw-marks on the inside of the glass.

No wonder Shockwave staged a fake lab for Megatron.

"Primus, you haven't kill him, have you?" He exclaimed, glancing at a workbench covered in what looked like ...fingers.

"The subject is an asset," Shockwave said, which wasn't an answer to the question, but probably meant no, he hadn't.

"He's a person, not an asset."

Shockwave didn't respond.

He led Ratchet through the lab until they arrived at a large vault door. Shockwave reached for the computerised lock panel, glancing pointedly at Ratchet. Ratchet sighed heavily and turned around. He waited until he heard Shockwave finish entering the security code before turning back around again, watching the giant door swing open.

He braced himself for an even drearier extension of the lab within the vault, but Sunstorm's ethereal golden glow filled the space and chased away the frightening alien-shadows. Shockwave stepped aside to let Ratchet see inside. Cautious, Ratchet stuck his head around the doorway.

"Ah, medic!" Sunstorm called pleasantly, his voice echoing through the speakers mounted on the wall.

Inside the vault, Sunstorm was sat on the floor surrounded by data-pads, inside a room-sized radiation-resistant plexiglass box, that itself was inside some sort of containment field.

"It's Ratchet," Ratchet corrected him absently, tipping his head back to take in the scale of the containment field. "My designation is Ratchet."

"Have you come seeking counsel?" Sunstorm rearranged himself into a cross-legged position on the floor, setting his hands in his lap like he was about to initiate a meditation session.

"Eh, not today," Ratchet managed a smile.

"Perhaps you would like to hear of my studies on the-"

Ratchet glanced to Shockwave, and the Decepticon slyly pressed a switch by the door that turned the microphone off. Oblivious, Sunstorm continued talking away to himself while Ratchet turned to address Shockwave, secure in the knowledge the seeker wouldn't hear them.

"You don't keep him in here all day, do you?"

"The subject resides within this vault between sessions, yes."

"What sessions?!" Ratchet had a sudden and horrible impression of the weird and barbaric tests Shockwave could be capable of justifying. "What are you doing to him? Aren't you supposed to be helping?"

"Advance science ten-thousand years and we will be no closer to containing the full brunt of this seeker's power than we are today." Shockwave announced, studying Sunstorm through the layers of protection. "Only the subject himself can control that power."

"But he *can't* control it."

"He can. It is his emotions he cannot control."

Ratchet's tank flipped fearfully, "You're not going to take those away, are you?"

"It was my initial suggestion," Shockwave admitted. "And the most time effective solution to the problem. However, certain sentimental parties objected to the idea."

Ratchet could guess who. Starscream, for all his big talk...

"So what's the long-term *impractical* solution?"

"...Counselling," Shockwave said with some distain.

"That's not really your forte."

"It is not. I am searching for qualified individuals within the ranks but have so far been unsuccessful."

"Well your version of therapy will do more harm than good," Ratchet told him, struggling to find the grey space between being honest and mean. "And leaving him in a box by himself all day isn't going to do him any favours either. Isolation can do a lot of damage."

"Would you suggest the subject be given free reign to wander the planet as he wishes?"

"He's not a psychopath," Ratchet muttered, though he knew Shockwave had good reasoning. Sunstorm was fine, ninety-nine-percent of the time, when he was just his usual preachy, annoying self. But when something did upset him (and he could be very easily upset) his control slipped, and his outbursts had devastating results.

"He needs a trained professional," he continued. "Not an emotionally-stunted cyclops. No offence."

"None taken."

Ratchet wracked his own memories for someone -still alive and still sane- who might fit the role. There was one whose name he couldn't quite recall; Ring? Rang? He'd have to make enquiries.

"Thus far, there has only been one volunteer." Shockwave continued. "He is not qualified, but they share an interest in religious teachings and mediation. The subject responds positively to his presence."

Ratchet's head snapped up in recognition, "Drift?"

Shockwave nodded shortly. "Correct."

Ratchet's spark fluttered, "Where is he?"

"He frequents the south-facing lookout post. He disrespectfully labelled my laboratory 'depressing', and makes a point to avoid my presence."

Shockwave wasn't the most personable individual and Drift wasn't wrong about the vibe of his lab, but Ratchet managed to refrain from dunking on Shockwave after he'd been so surprisingly helpful, and non-homicidal.

He turned on his heel to leave, but spotted the offended shock flash across Sunstorm's face at him rudely leaving right in the middle of their one-sided conversation. Ratchet rushed back to the microphone controls and flicked the switch.

"Sorry Sunstorm, I'll be right back to tell you all about how much Starscream misses you."

That did the trick. Sunstorm brightened physically and metaphorically. Ratchet took his finger off the button before the seeker could start prattling on again and leapt through the vault door, leaving him to Shockwave's company.

Ratchet went back up into the fake lab and took the elevator to the top of the tower. The numbers counting up the floor levels seemed to move unbearably slow. Ratchet bounced on the balls of his feet impatiently, chest aching with a sort of anxiety he hadn't experienced since he was a youngling.

The doors slid apart and he stepped sideways through them before they had fully opened, out onto the open-air balcony. The platform was stocked full of long-range weapons pointing in every direction. Ratchet tried not to think about how many of them might have fired a blaster bolt responsible for killing members of Elita's unit.

"Drift?" He called into the silence. There was no wind. The air was still and eerie.

He reached the edge of the balcony and glanced over the railings, down at the barricaded walkways and destroyed bridges below. Shockwave had made himself quite the fortified island. No wonder Elita had had such trouble with him.

He pushed away from it and followed the building around, wondering if he had somehow missed him and beginning to grow frustrated.

"Drift!" He couldn't seem to shout any louder, his voice cracking in the middle. "Drift, it's me, fraggit, where are-?!"

He skidded to a stop. A figure was stood hunched over the balcony railing, the plating of their back locked tight with tension. The looming shadow of the tower peak above them made it difficult to make them out.

"...Drift?"

The mech's head snapped up. The shape of the helm, the set of the optics, the arch of their cheek- all unmistakable.

"Ratchet?!"

The relief was so overwhelming Ratchet had to run to him. Drift straightened up and turned around, concern written across his handsome features. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to-"

Ratchet caught his face between his hands and kissed him. He heard Drift's breath hitch in surprise before lips parted and instinctively deepened the kiss. Warm *strong* hands came around him and pulled him closer. Time seemed to both stop and run too fast, and a mere instant later Ratchet's vents were desperate for air but he couldn't bear to draw himself away.

With great reluctance, he broke the kiss, leaving their damp, tingling lips brushing temptingly. Drift's hands tightened around him like they were never going to let him go. Ratchet swallowed thickly, readying himself to speak - but words didn't come.

Drift let their foreheads touch.

"Hey," he smiled, charming and youthful and sweet.

Ratchet wanted to melt. He shuttered his optics and forced himself to get it together before he embarrassed himself further.

"Don't you 'hey' me," he struggled to sound serious as Drift's shaky smile only widened. "*I mean* it. What the Pit were you playing at, leaving me like that?!"

Drift's smile turned sad and apologetic, "I'm sorry."

"You're damn right, you're sorry," Ratchet huffed. He tried to look away as his face began to feel hot, but standing in each others arms, clutching at one another, there wasn't really anywhere to hide. "I thought you'd ...I... I just wanted to say goodbye-"

Drift shook his head, "I don't want to say goodbye."

"You volunteered to *leave*."

"I was..." Drift looked aside. "You were in stasis and Sunstorm still needed help, someone to talk to. I thought I could be the one to do that. I knew that if you were awake -it's what you would have done. And you were going to be busy dealing with the negotiations anyway. I thought it would be better if ...if I wasn't there to distract you. Just for a little while."

Ratchet laughed humourlessly, shaking his head.

"You're not a distraction. You're ...you're more to me than that." He swallowed, stroking his thumb across Drift's sharp jaw-line before reaching around to gripping the back of his neck. "I should have run away with you when we first had the chance."

Drift smile was dazzling and tempting and made Ratchet feel disgustingly gooey on the inside.

"Maybe we still can, when we know society can cope without you for a couple weeks."

"Never gonna happen," Ratchet smirked, and Drift was the one to lean in and kiss him this time, slow and leisurely. Ratchet hummed into it, feeling weightless.

"I love you," he breathed, when Drift pulled back enough.

Drift's smirk became unbearably smug.

Ratchet frowned, "You better say it back, or so help me-"

"I'm in love you," Drift sobered quickly. "Have been for years."

Ratchet took his hand and threaded their fingers together during their next kiss -the fingers of his *new* hand. Drift stroked a thumb across the backs of his knuckles, and Ratchet squeezed his fingers, eternally thankful to Knock Out that it wasn't *Barricade's* hand he was doing this with.

Because like Starscream had said, Primus only knew where *that* had been...

Epilogue: fifteen years later

Ratchet walked into the Earth-based Cybertronian Youth Recreation Centre just in time to watch Misfire transform into a miniature jet and zoom nose-first into the wall. At full throttle. Having made no attempt to avoid collision.

The resounding '*bang*' of his impact made several surrounding mechs jump. Breakdown, sitting with his back to the incident- lurched so violently he upended his entire cube over Knock Out.

"*Starscream!*" Knock Out roared, leaping to his pedes, arms aloft. "Get your *sparkling!*"

Ratchet stopped in the doorway and sighed, wondering if he should just turn around and walk right back out again. Unfortunately, he'd been spotted.

"You see, Medic!" Starscream snapped, ignoring the sticky, disgruntled Knock Out currently being patted down by an apologetic Breakdown to rush to Misfire's side. "I told you his optics needed looking at!"

On the floor, Misfire managed to tumble out of altmode, relatively unharmed save for the optics spinning about dizzily in his helm. Spotting Starscream's approach he attempted to flee beneath the Rec Centre tables. Starscream darted after him, catching him by the foot and dragging him out and up into his arms.

Dejected, Misfire hung from the hold limply as his creator cooed indulgently over his nonexistent injury.

"He's *fine*, Starscream," Ratchet pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off a very familiar headache. "I've looked at his optics. I've looked at his breaks. I've looked at his gyros-"

"Then why does this keep happening?" Starscream demanded, pointing with condemnation at the many *many* dents Misfire had left in the walls over the last five years.

"Maybe he's just dumb?" Skywarp offered from the sofa in front of the TV.

"Maybe he's part Conehead after all?" Sideswipe, on the sofa behind, leant sideways to nudge Ramjet. Ramjet responded with a look of utter terror, searching around to make sure Megatron hadn't manifested into the room and overheard.

"If he's stupid he got that from Megatron," Starscream argued, cuddling poor Misfire closer, tactfully ignoring how the sparkling was desperately trying to wriggle free. "We can't all be

blessed with looks *and* intelligence, can we sweetspark?"

Misfire squirmed and scrunched up his face unattractively.

Starscream sighed, reluctantly setting him down, "Go play."

Misfire gratefully transformed and jetted off. Within an instant there was another resounding slam that shook the walls. Starscream's left optic twitched.

"He's fine," Ratchet reassured in a gentler tone before Starscream could work himself into anxious state. "He inherited his sire's thick helm."

Starscream grumbled something about him inheriting Megatron's sense of direction and stamped off in search of his errant offspring. Again.

"I've said for years this would be an inevitable consequence of cross-coding reproduction," Sunstorm drifted over from the 'quiet corner' to insert his opinion on the situation. Starscream was, thankfully, out of audial range.

"And I've said for years that that's not true and you need to stop saying that," Ratchet glared. "Go back to your corner and meditate with Drift."

Sunstorm sniffed self-importantly and completely ignored his advice, moving over to where Starscream and Thundercracker were bouncing a fussing Misfire between them and arguing over the location of the imaginary dent his latest collision had left in his head.

Ratchet's spark still clenched nervously when he saw the golden seeker reach for the sparkling, but over a decade of working with Rung meant it had been years since Sunstorm had been responsible for leaving so much as a surface burn on someone.

He watched as Starscream hand the sparkling over to his brother without a moments hesitation, and his fears evaporated as quickly as they had arisen as Sunstorm hugged the little trouble-maker close. Misfire didn't fuss half as much in his arms as he did his creator's.

The warm feeling doubled when arms circled around his middle and pulled him into an embrace of his own. Drift's comforting scent filled his olfactory and he shuttered his optics with a sigh.

"Ready to go?" Drift spoke warmly against the side of his helm.

Ratchet onlined his optics and glanced around the room. They were due to meet with Optimus and Elita on Cybertron in half-an-hour, to discuss the distribution of medical personnel and equipment across reestablished Cybertronian territories as they continued rebuilding their home. Many refugees that had fled the war were now returning to the planet, and with the numbers growing every day Ratchet knew Optimus was going to ask him to transfer to Iacon, to leave Earth behind.

"We can give it a few more minutes," Ratchet smiled, watching the Aerialbots file through the door and accost the seekers -Silverbolt utterly melting at the sight of Misfire's scowling face, Starscream basking in the second-hand attention as his carrier.

Drift set his chin on his shoulder and knocked their helms together.

All in all, budding peace wasn't a bad result for fifteen years hard work. Ratchet couldn't take all the credit though; Misfire's endearing disposition had won over the more volatile of mechs.

Because *he* certainly couldn't have disarmed the likes of Tarn with just a smile.

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